

不負如來不負卿



自憫多情治世行
入山又恐誤佳城
世間哪得雙全法
不負如來不負卿

不負如來不負卿



身懷重寶
入山又恐
世間唯此
不負如來
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lang="en">

Faithful to Buddha, Faithful to You - Chapter 01-22

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Ch. 1-2

If you haven't already, please read the [Introduction](#) post first before reading ch.1.

Chapter 1: My experiment



I sit there stupefied as I take in the endless sand dunes around me. Farther away, a few wandering camels can be spotted, but before I can come closer, they have run away. They are even smarter than domesticated camels. I have been dragging my feet along for hours, my eyes continuously searching, and by now I am exhausted. Without a GPS device, without a sense of direction, to keep walking on like this is pointless. Fortunately, it is mid-Autumn. The weather is dry but the temperature is not too low, making it endurable. But the darkening sky worries me. By the time the sun sets, if I continue to roam in the desert without any protection gears, I am bound to die by either hunger or hypothermia.

Even with my eyes closed, I still sway on my feet. The dizziness from landing has not dissipated. Tiredly, I lift my left wrist to look at the time travel watch, and let out a heavy sigh. The third attempt is still failure, even though it is an improvement on the first two attempts, since this time I was able to land.

I have participated in this time travel experiment for over a year. As a research student majoring in history, my original purpose was merely to help lead the project with the advisor – a renowned history professor. But after meeting me, the biologists insisted on conducting physicals on me, and concluded that I was perfect test subject-material.

There were no shortages of test subjects, but all the previous volunteers have all failed in their attempts. After sending them home to recuperate, the researchers then shifted their 'psychological warfare' to me. As a specialized research student, I have a responsibility and duty to unveil the mystery, to decode the answers, to give truth to history. To be able to go back and experience the events in ancient history, how many can boast of such an accomplishment? If successful, I will become a pioneer, and my name will get recorded in history books like a legend.

I am a workaholic. My motto in life is: 'a thousand books, a thousand miles, a thousand life stories'. I wish to become accomplished, to make my 'boss' proud. 'Boss' is the endearing term we undergrads use to call the project advisor. Because of that, without even waiting for my full 'agreement', the eager researchers have already pushed me on the experiment platform.

The first attempt, I was gone for not even half a minute before I returned falling backwards. I could not remember anything except a dizzy and nauseous feeling when I time travelled. All the equipment I brought along—14c detector, GPS device, laptop, digital camera, etc—was ruined by the high-level radiation. And so after half a month in the hospital, I began an expedited training on using primitive tools, including a small shovel used in excavations.

The second attempt, there was some progress. I disappeared for about ten minutes. Everyone was overcome with joy and ready to begin a celebration party, but then I was heard falling down on the grass outside the experiment room. When I woke up, I recalled briefly an image of a village and streams of people that I saw when I was airborne in space. The setting and clothes seemed to belong to the Han dynasty. But before I could land, a powerful force had already pulled me back. All the primitive tools I brought along were also broken into pieces.

Based on my report, the researchers concluded that the experiment could bring us back in time to two thousand years ago. Consequently, I had to revisit the history books on the Warring States period and Qin-Han Dynasty while still on the hospital bed. My injuries not yet fully healed, I was already forced to sit up and to undergo another expedited training. This time I was trained on drawing diagrams and charts, and sketching architectural works. The researchers

decided to not let me bring any heavy tools, only ones that are small and light but handy.

By the time I was six months into training, the testing equipment was upgraded to a CT scan. My tools this time included a big sketchpad and pencils. Before I began the test, my boss advised me to be careful. I was not allowed to leave behind any non-biodegradable garbage from the 21st century, because that will create problems for future archeologists and historians.

In the third attempt, I landed successfully without any injuries since I fell down on a desert. But I soon realized my dire situation. Without a person in sight or any sign of life, after several hours roaming, I am still unsure whether I have arrived in ancient times. I can only confirm one thing—I have left the experiment room.

There is no water, no food or medicine, because even if I bring them along they would have suffer irradiation. My Northface backpack only contains a Swiss Army Knife, a compass, clothes, a notepad, archeological tools, a sketchpad, pencils and some change in old currency. Nothing that can help my current situation. May be I should give up and return. The researchers will continue to improve the equipment and hopefully next time, I will land at a place with people. Unable to contain it, I let out a sigh full of regrets. But with the sky darkening, I have to hurry, or else there will not be enough solar energy to start the device.

I pull out the radiation protection hat stuffed inside my Han costume and cover my head, put on gloves, and pull on the zipper. Tilting the time travel watch toward the sun, I turn the safety lock and count: one, two, three...

I count to ten but still nothing happens. I continue: twenty, fifty, a hundred...

What is happening? I cannot possibly be that unlucky. I look at the watch again. Still not moving. I tap on it, no reaction. I raise the watch higher toward the sun, still nothing. I take off the watch, shake it vigorously, and still the power light did not appear green.

The wind is picking up, and soon the sun is covered by the billowing wind and sand. Damn this solar watch! Am I going to lose my life in this place of undetermined time and wilderness?

I point my finger to the sky and curse the researchers—not letting me bring any water or food, only some big and heavy coins, what is the point of it all? If I have known the watch was going to fail against the wind, I would have insisted on bringing food and water regardless of irradiation. After subjecting my body to this cursed watch three times, irradiation was already long happening. I would rather die by choking on irradiated bread than die by hunger and thirst this way!

I end the tirade when I get a mouthful of sand. The sun is disappearing fast on the skyline. Soon after, the desert will get freezing cold. My anti-radiation shirt can withstand wind and cold, but it can do nothing for my incoming hunger and thirst. I hunch my body and crawl up to a higher sand dune. Far ahead, in the dusty night, I spot sparks of a bonfire. I have never seen such warm light!

I cannot remember how long it took me to escape from that dark and hazy desert, except that by the time I stumble near the bonfire, my eyes are blurry and my throat is burnt dry. I notice that around the bonfire are various tents, sounds of people, and camels. Eyes bright, I burst into one of those tents and after that, I blackout.

Chapter 2: A monk and a nun



When I regain consciousness, I find myself surrounded by a group of strange-looking people: high nose, deep eyes, thin lips, round faces, short necks, smooth white skin, their pupils a dark brown. The men are thick and tall, the women plump and healthy. They all have curly hair, a

reddish hue, down to their shoulders. Their clothes are even more unusual. The men are dressed in collared tunics with fitted sleeves and cinched at the waist. They wear boots high up to their knees and a sword slung on each of their back. The women's dresses are knee-length with fitted sleeves. They wrap their shoulders in shawls and also wear high boots.

I am impressed with myself. Even in a state of exhaustion, I can still observe and describe the appearance and clothes of people around me like a professional with only a few glances. The information loses meaning when I start to smell the food.

There are only bread and bowls of hot noodles, but that is enough for me to salivate. I quickly take the food from the hands of a woman in her forties. After mumbling a thank you, I dig in ravenously. The bread soon vanishes and the noodle bowls follow after a few mouthfuls. My stomach finally regains some feeling. I still want to eat some more and hesitantly I begin to ask, only to realize a problem—we don't speak the same language.

Not a surprise since a glance could already tell me they are not Han people, and I am still not certain whether I have returned to the past or not. Who knows, maybe this experiment is merely a free plane ride that can take me to some desert in the Middle East or Africa, only to meet a primitive nomadic tribe by chance. Maybe I am still in the 21st century. I try to use English, to no avail.

As I contemplate my dilemma amidst the strange sounds, two new people suddenly arrive in the tent. The others immediately stop their discussion and appear to be very respectful toward the newcomers. I can already guess their identities, but when they come closer, I get such a shock that renders me agape for a long minute.

They are a nun in her thirties and a young monk around fifteen, sixteen. But what surprised me the most is the dignified and noble aura they exude. They just stand there silently, and still their otherworldly aura spreads around me.

The nun's face is similar to the other women, but her skin is a smoother white, her eyes are big, her eyebrows long and sleek. In her eyes there is a glimpse of worry. With her round and full body, even the simple brown kāṣāya* cannot hide its beauty. However, it seems the nun's forehead is different compared to others

—it is pressed down and back toward the nape, a somewhat bizarre image. I recall that ancient Egyptians and Persians used to have a custom of pressing their foreheads flat when young, but that practice was only limited to members of the royal family. I wonder whether the nun's forehead was already like that at birth or got pressed afterward. Still, the flat forehead does nothing to lessen her beauty.

*kāṣāya: robes worn by Buddhist monks and nuns

My observation moves onto the fifteen-year-old monk and with a start, I realize how strangely bewitching his handsomeness is. Still the same high nose and deep eyes, but not as rugged as the others'. His face is exactly like a Greek statue, the lines radiant like a sculpture that was chiseled with great attention to detail. His countenance is a work of harmony: his eyebrows long and dark, his pupils a light gray and endlessly deep, untainted like the blue sky atop the desert. He may be young, but the air he exudes is majestic and bright, giving me a feeling of both warmth and intrigue.

His lips are thin but the lines are clear; when they are closed, the edges curved into an elegant line. His face is long, his chin sharp, situated on top of a thin and long neck like a swan, each line a vivid brush. Unlike the other men in the tent, his skin is the color of a honeycomb. Wrapped in a long cloak that covered his entire body, with his height at 1m70*, it makes him look even more imposing, but also renders his clothes rather plain. It is obvious he will continue to grow, maybe to 1m80* or taller.

*1m70 = 5'7" in height, 1m80 = 5'10"

I study those two strangers intently, my mind a mess, until I wake with a start when they begin to speak to me in broken Han.

It takes me a while before I realize they are asking me where I come from and why I am lost wandering here. I look at them with anguish and reply, "Please tell me, where is this place, and to which country does it belong to?"

The nun looks uncertain but the little* monk seems to have already grasped a few things. He suddenly bends down next to me; his handsome and pure face shines brightly. Bewitched by that beauty, my heart beats fast and I feel disoriented for a second.

*little as in age

“We arrive in Wensu, almost. You are Han?” he asks me.

Not yet recovered from my skipping heartbeat, I chuckle at how serious he looks despite his accented Han and mixed-up order of grammar.

Shyness overcomes him and his face reddens slightly, “Han language, I, speak not good.”

He turns back to the nun and speaks with her for a long while. I stop chuckling, trying to guess the place he referred to. From his pronunciation, it doesn’t seem like a place in the Central Plains [mainland China]. The monk turns back to me and continues with our conversation, “You, go, where?”

I reply eagerly, “Chang’an*, do you know it?”

*capital of ancient China for more than ten dynasties

Seeing the monk nod, I sigh in relief. So it is a landmark that exists and is known here.

“But...” the monk looks at me hesitantly. “Very far, alone, you?”

I nod my head tiredly. Right now, except for Chang’an, I cannot think of any other place. At the very least, I don’t have to worry about language barrier there.

“We, go Kuchi, you, on the way,” the monk says.

It takes him quite some effort to pronounce a word. I am brimming with laughter but I try hard to suppress it. Saving my life, and now making conversation with me, that is plenty to be grateful for. I wonder what is this Kuchi place? I must have already landed for seven, eight hours, and yet still no clue on where and when in time. A student researcher majoring in history from a famous university like me, what an embarrassment!

“You, your name?”

“Huh?” Lost in my own thoughts, it takes the monk asking a second time before I realize he is asking for my name.

“My name is Ai Qing.”

her name has the same pronunciation as the word “love” in Chinese.

My name has long been in a topic of laughter for people. Ever since I was young I was nicknamed “Love” [English]. The boys loved to tease and shout out

my name: Oh, my love! [English]

I have fought to change my name but my parents refused. After a while I got used to it. Being called “ai qing” [love] is no big deal, except that after bearing such a name for years, there is still no sign of my love cupid.

“My name is...” the monk then says a long string of strange sounds that I cannot seem to remember.

I can only smile in reply. The monk patiently repeats it three times. Based on the pronunciation, I manage to find corresponding syllables in the Han language: Ku-ma-la-ji-ba, indeed quite hard to say. I try anyway, “Ku-ma-la-ji-ba, Ku-ma-la-ji-ba, Ku-ma-la-ji-ba...”

His lips follow the ups and downs of my pronunciation and end in laughter—the sound high, pure and resonating like a stream of water against rocks. I suddenly remember, not too long ago it was me who laughed at his wrong Han pronunciation, now it is me on the receiving end. My cheeks burn.

The monk laughs for a bit and stops, perhaps noticing my reddening face. He points toward the beautiful nun standing behind, “Mother, my, Jiba.”

The beautiful nun is his mother? They are both monastic? Since he is so young, his mother must have induced him into Buddhism? A feeling of regret passes by me, but I soon chase it away. Jiba? I wonder if that is a given name or an honorific. I raise my voice and say her name. The nun nods at me.

“You, rest, we, tomorrow, journey,” are the monk’s last words.

After the two of them left, I stay back at the tent with four more women. I don’t understand what they say, but they seem friendly enough. Not daring to ask for more food, I lie down on the soft bedding they made especially for me.

So I am at a faraway place with a language barrier. Outside in the desert, the wind lets out a screeching sound, a terrible wail in the middle of the night. My heart weighs down, and every time I close my eyes, homesickness overcomes me and tears flow, wetting my pillow. I try to stop that pathetic feeling by using my most familiar method.

I begin to analyze the images that I saw before going to sleep and name each of the items: I lie on a bed with patterns sewn in rhombus shapes, my head lies

on a pillow with flower patterns interspersed with small silver blocks, and my body is covered by a blanket with a triangle pattern. The item holding the water is a ceramic vase with one handle, patterned like a net. The bowl holding the bread earlier was a bowl made of clay. I guess that I have come to the ancient times because the techniques used to craft those items are still very primitive. Judging by the level of pottery skills in Central Plains, these techniques must have existed more than two thousand years ago. But I don't know how it is here.

The screaming winds outside along with the steady breathing in the tent cannot stop the exhaustion and sleepiness coming to me. I curl up in the warm blanket and slowly fall asleep.

If any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese history/Buddhism, you are welcome to comment on any inaccuracies. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated. But do remember to be nice about it. Translating without any help or beta reader is hard work.

Ch. 3

Ramblings: I had expected a few readers, but the Stats page told me I got over 900 views and 400 visitors just a day after the blog went online. o.O Words fail me. All I can do is give each and every one of you a big virtual hug. You guys give me much encouragement to keep going. Thank you and thank you!♥♥

This chapter is more than twice as long as the previous ones. As you can tell from the chapter title, Ai Qing finally figures out where and when she has time travelled to. But to arrive at this conclusion, a lot of history and Chinese names are involved. As such, this chapter is not as exciting as others. This is a usual occurrence for many chapters in this novel (how do you think they reach a 100 in number??)

This may bore some readers but you have to remember, Xiao Chun (the author) began to write this novel because she wanted readers to learn about Kumarajiva, his contributions in history, and ancient Chinese/Buddhist history as a whole. She realized a pure non-fiction would not capture any interest, so she decided to weave it into a love story, given the rise of romance novels today.

I have already told you all as much in other posts how heavy this novel is, so if you are here, I'm assuming you are open to these chapters as well right?

Jokes aside, if you have read my [Translation Approach](#), you will know that I can't and won't be translating these kinds of chapters all the time for many reasons. So don't be frightened. It's just that this early in the novel, you need some historical context in order to understand the settings and the main characters.

So bear with me guys!

If it makes you feel any better, I banged my head on the table many times as I translated this chapter. Thank god for the invention of Google, and says what you will academics, Wikipedia is gold okay?

P.S. Due to the information overload, I tried hard but could not make my translation as smooth as in previous chapters. Forgive me.

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square

brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Credits of this chapter also go to **Ari** and **Yumna**, my new proofreader and beta-reader, respectively.

Chapter 3: I know where I am



The next morning, we pack up and begin the journey. I have regained my energy. Given that I ate their food and slept in their tent, I ought to contribute somehow! Sadly, I don't understand what they say so when they pack the tents, I end up hindering instead of helping them. But they are all very kind and do not scold me at all. Besides, even if they do scold me, I would not have understood a single word.

Even though I am a stranger who came from the sky, they set aside a camel for me to use. But the Han outfit, with its long puffy sleeves and its skirt reaching down my feet, makes it hard to climb onto the camel's back. I look at my useless clothing and with a helpless look, I stick out my tongue at the little* monk.

*little as in age, referring to Kumalajiba (as he is known to her at the time)

He smiles kindly and turns back to talk to a middle-aged woman. Soon after, I receive an outfit similar to theirs. I change into those clothes, which I find a little too big, a given since they are so tall. The tunic reaches my knees; the right sleeve is fitted at the arm but open at the shoulder. Underneath are pantaloons and knee-high boots. Haha, this is somehow rather fashionable! Which Han woman would dare to wear clothes that bare the shoulders? But the important thing is that with these clothes, climbing up and down the camel is not so difficult anymore. Because early morning in the desert is still freezing cold, the

little monk kindly gives me a shawl.

I mentally count, there are around sixty people in the caravan, but including me, there are only five women. Except for the little monk, everyone else [the men] is dressed like a soldier and wears an ancient warrior's long sword on his side. And judging from their expression, all the attention is focused on the monastic mother and son.

I ponder the information. Before, I have only seen the monk and nun with servants, never with an army like this. The more I observe the two, the more I notice how their mannerisms show that they are not ordinary people. Compared to others, the little monk's Han [language skill] is the best, even better than his beautiful mother's, so I decide to stay by his side to get a bearing on things. Even though communication is still difficult, I am able to grasp quite of a bit of information.

I ask the monk if he knows the current emperor of the Central Plains. He thinks for a long while and replies with something that sounds similar to Qin/Qing*. Must be the Qin dynasty* then! It can't be the Qing dynasty*. The researchers have confirmed that the time machine can only bring us back to two thousand years ago.

*As the pinyin shows, the two sound very similar in Chinese. Qin dynasty here refers to the first imperial dynasty of China, from 221 to 206 BCE. The Qing dynasty is the last imperial dynasty, ruling from 1644 to 1912 CE.

I then ask the monk where he learned the Han language. He gestures for a long time before I can somewhat put it together—in Kuchi he had two Han teachers. The monk confides further, a bit embarrassed, that he only learned Han for a few months but five years have gone by with no practice, so he cannot engage in conversation very well.

I am taken aback. The monk is not yet sixteen, which means he began learning Han when he was only ten or eleven years old. He hasn't used it for five years, yet he can still communicate this well, his memory is quite impressive. When I was in university, I chose to study German as a foreign language. Afterwards I did not touch it for a few years, and now I can only remember one phrase: Ich liebe dich (I love you). If I am asked to speak with a German, it would be no different than a duck that hears thunder*.

*'a duck that hears thunder' is a Vietnamese idiom, the original text in Chinese says 'chicken and duck talk', both mean the same thing—people in a dialogue who do not understand each other

Because I landed in the middle of a desert, I can only guess that this place belongs to either the Western Regions* or Mongolia. I try asking about the Silk Road, but the monk doesn't understand. I explain to him that silk and tea get transported from the Central Plains to Abbasid Caliphate (now part of Arabia), Persia (now Iran), and Roman Empire (now Italy) on this road. He finally nods in understanding and tells me that Kuchi is located on this road. Hope lights up in me.

* Western Regions or Xiyu, a historical name specified in the Chinese chronicles between the 3rd century BCE to the 8th century CE that referred to the regions west of Yumen Pass, most often Central Asia

I rack my brain to recall all the places related to the Silk Road: Yanqi, Shanshan, Shule (now part of Kashgar, Xinjiang), Loulan, Khotan (now part of Hotan, Xinjiang), Gaochang (now part of Turpan), Wusun (now part of Ili, Xinjiang), Dunhuang... In that list there are a few places that after pondering, the monk repeats with similar pronunciation, others are uncertain. When I mention Kucha, I abruptly stop. Kuchi, Kucha (Qiu Ci, now part of Kuqa county, Xinjiang), these two sound very similar, can it possibly be *that* ancient kingdom, the wealthiest and most powerful one in the Western Regions?

I look at the monk and repeat the name Kucha. The monk pauses for a moment before he nods and points to himself. My God, I finally know where I am. I have time travelled to the Western Regions, the Western Regions in the Qin dynasty!

That means these Kucha people that I came across are actually Tocharians. Historical records wrote that the ancestors of Kucha people came from the Da [Great] Yuezhi tribe, also known as Tocharians. Elongated face, high nose, deep-set eyes, thin lips, white skin, are all typical features of the first Caucasians. Tocharian tribes stopped their nomadic lifestyle around 1,000 BCE and began to settle at Kucha, Yanqi and Turpan. I have visited many museums when I travelled to Xinjiang, and I found the mummies there very interesting. The mummies were preserved fully intact for more than 3,000 years, and their skulls still clearly show features characteristic of Caucasians, a prime example being the Loulan Beauty. But perhaps because Kucha is located at the heart of the Silk Road, a place of

gathering and mixing between various ethnic groups, the Kucha people have rounder faces than modern Caucasians.

My excitement, which was on a rise, soon plummets. There are few records on the Western Regions during the Qin dynasty, and they only come from “Traditions of Western Regions”, part of the Book of Han. The history of the Western Regions in the Han [people’s] memory began with the Emperor Wu of Han’s reign: Zhang Qian journeyed to the Western Regions, formed an alliance with the Wusun people, made camps and farmed, and battled with the Xiongnu for hundreds of years.

However, to have travelled to the Qin dynasty is not such a bad thing. I need to get to Chang’an [the capital] soon, so that I can witness firsthand the upheavals at the end of the Qin dynasty, and meet the famous legends in history. I keep repeating that wish to the little monk. He contemplates for a moment before nodding, and promises to make arrangements. But then he further adds that the journey is long, takes about a year to arrive, and it is currently a time of war and chaos, with many dangers.

Goodness, has war already begun? Then I cannot be delayed any further. I happily tell him it does not matter [that there is war]. He gives me a puzzled look. I don’t know how to explain to him why a girl like me is so interested in wars, so I give him a weak grin in reply.

Our conversation continues to almost noon. Since autumn at midday is still burning hot, I have to cover my head with the shawl. The little monk pulls down his cloak, exposing his right shoulder, and under the sunlight, his honeycomb skin glows vibrantly, the picture of a youth in his prime. This style of robes, leaving the right shoulder bare, is common amongst the monastic in India and the Western Regions. Later, when Buddhism spread to the Central Plains, the robes evolved, like the saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”*. These robes make sense, considering India’s hot climate and how the Western Regions are located along the desert area, with huge difference in temperature from day to night. Thus, conservative clothing for early morning and night and shoulder-bared clothing for midday are very suitable for the conditions here.

*Ai Qing used different words but I used this idiom instead since it’s more recognizable by English readers.

The monk's face suddenly reddens and his eyes leave me to look elsewhere. I realize with a start that I have been staring at him intently for a long while. How embarrassing! I have only seen this type of clothing in pictures, so when I see them being worn by a real person, my eyes get lost in a trance and just stare, manners totally forgotten. Since I cannot use my research as an excuse to explain my behavior, I can only grin weakly like a fool.

We stop to rest at a small poplar forest. The servants quickly set up the tents and gather dry branches to build a fire for cooking. After a bellyful of hot noodle bowls and Western Regions' bread, I start to feel sleepy.

After their meal, the mother-son pair immediately retires to their tent and begins to chant their Buddhist mantra. Their scripture is placed on a pillow. Curious, I approach them, and once again I find myself in surprise.

The scripture is written on cloth and the writing is quite strange. They seem to be characters consisting of lots of strokes resembling figure eights, written both horizontally and vertically. Even though I cannot read it, I am not unfamiliar with the language. It is probably the lost Tocharian script from long ago. This is the oldest Indo-European language known to this date, a derivative of the Brahmi script from India, which is still not completely deciphered even in this day.

I draw closer and in a tremble, I lift the scripture from the little monk's lap, my voice choked, "My God, this is the Tocharian script. It's the Tocharian script!" If I can bring home these scriptures, they would be invaluable as research material!

The beautiful nun furrows her brow. The little monk, a little startled, looks at me in surprise, "You know the writing? This is Kucha writing, not Tocharian." [Lương Hiền's T/N] "Tocharian" was a term coined by German scholars Sieg and Müller in 1908, which they divided into Tocharian A and Tocharian B. Chinese researchers use Tocharian A for Yanqi language, and Tocharian B to mean the language of the Kucha people.

Ah, that's right, "Tocharian" is a German coinage. These Kucha people certainly wouldn't know Tocharian refers to their language. But people from the 21st century are used to that name. I smile shyly but my eyes are still glued to those funny figure eights. A feeling of euphoria arises in me as I absorb the fact that I am actually looking at real Tocharian script.

As a historian, to be able to hear and see an extinct language like this is such an immeasurable honor. How many linguists have spent their entire lives trying to decipher ancient writing systems by looking for clues on past relics? In the 18th century, Champillion successfully deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphics, a first, which helped unveil the mystery that hung over history for thousands of years. His name went down as a legacy. Even today, scholars are still unable to decipher the Tocharian script fully, so if I can learn to read it...

I grab the little monk's sleeves and plead, "Please, teach me Tocharian—I mean Kucha language!"

He is momentarily stunned, then he asks me, "You know Han* writing?"
*as in classical Chinese

"Of course," I reply.

The little monk turns to the nun and talks for a long while. The nun looks up at me for a moment and says a few more words to her son. The two engage in a long conversation, which makes me anxious. Just as I am about to fear there will be a refusal, the little monk turns to me with a sly look in his light gray eyes.

"I can teach you, but you teach me Han language."

I sigh in relief. So he wants it to be a give and take, that's fine!

I reply, "Sure," and after a moment of hesitation, I add, "Even though I am not well-versed in Buddhist texts, I can teach you the Han script, explain the Analects, the Classic of Poetry, Commentary of Zuo, and Strategies of the Warring States."

I study history, not Buddhism. I have researched on the latter a bit, but to go in depth over the specifics of Buddhism like Tripiṭaka* —sutras, abhidharma and vinaya—is beyond me. I am a little regretful now. Have I known that I was going to time travel to this place and accompany these monk and nun like this, I would have done more homework on Buddhism.

*Sanskrit for Three Baskets, refers to 3 categories of text in the Buddhist canon

"Don't understand Buddhist texts, no problem, teach what you know is fine." The little monk seems very happy. I find the warm smile hidden in his brow quite beautiful.

I suddenly recall, the Buddhist texts that are handed down in the Central Plains are all translated from Sanskrit and from a couple of languages of the Western Regions. This little monk is from Kucha, there is no need for him to learn Buddhist scripture in Han. Instead, it makes more sense for Han monks to learn Buddhist scriptures from him!

That day, I discover something else equally interesting: after their midday meal, the mother-son pair doesn't eat anything else. People in ancient history only ate two meals a day; the monastic life was even stricter. When I ask the little monk about it, he replies in broken Han that according to the precepts, he can consume food between morning to noon, but from afternoon to the next morning, he is not allowed to eat anything.

This rule originates from a story as follows: A disciple of Gautama Buddha* went out to beg for food on a late afternoon, when the sky was already beginning to darken. A pregnant woman mistook the monk for a ghost and in her fright, she miscarried the baby. Since then, Gautama Buddha set out this rule. The only exceptions are people who are sick or those who do heavy labor—they are allowed to eat in the evening to maintain health.

*Siddhartha Gautama, founder of Buddhism, or simply the Buddha, also the same one named in this novel's title.

I nod my head. During the times of Gautama Buddha, the monks spent most of their time meditating, which didn't use up much energy, so not eating in the evening was fine. But when Buddhism was introduced to the Central Plains, Han monks still ate in the evening. It was because in the Central Plains, even monks had to farm, so they took the initiative to change the rule. This shows the flexibility of Buddhism. Perhaps because of that, even though thousands of years have gone by, Buddhism still grows strong.

As I observe them eat and drink, I notice something else. The female servants use an item that resembles a mesh bag to filter the water first before giving it to the mother-son pair. At first, I thought maybe they fear the water in the desert is impure and smelly so they filter it before drinking. But when I see that my water is not filtered, I wonder about it.

The little monk once again tries hard to explain it to me. Before drinking, monks and nuns must filter the water to avoid swallowing the micro organisms

that may be present. If not, they might accidentally violate the precept of no-killings. Because of that, one of the rules of the monastic life requires a mesh bag to be carried on person at all times, or else they are not allowed to leave their residence for more than 20 miles.

His explanation makes me recall the story of Xuan Zhang* travelling alone in a desolate desert, and despite nearly dying from thirst, he still poured out all the water from his leather skin. It was because he tenaciously followed the rule—no drinking water that has not been filtered.

*a Chinese Buddhist monk famous for his seventeen-year journey from Chang'an to India

During the night, I sit next to the campfire outside the tent and studiously write down everything I have heard and seen the past days. High above, millions of stars glow brightly against the dark blue sky.

I recall the days I spent travelling in Xinjiang in the 21st century, where I also craned up to look at the starry sky in the middle of the quiet night, and asked myself if perhaps the ancient people in history are also looking at the same sky. The sky I am looking at now, is it also the same sky I will be looking at two thousand years later? I get lost in the thoughts. The me today and the me two thousand years later, are we both looking at the same sky? If so, how did I come to exist?

If any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese history/Buddhism, feel free to comment on any inaccuracies or suggest a better substitute name/word/phrase. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated.

Ch. 4

Ramblings: Ahaha, if last chapter was heavy in history, this one is heavy on linguistics. Once again you can tell that from the chapter title. While English novels often use ambiguous chapter titles, Chinese novels are very direct in their naming, sometimes blunt to the point of giving a spoiler. This makes it easier find a certain chapter that you like to reread, which I often do.

I actually had fun doing research while translating this chapter since I have an interest in linguistics (well, in humanities in general).

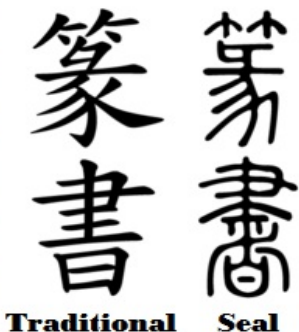
I have started cross-referencing the Vietnamese version with the Chinese ebook I found online, which I find very helpful in this chapter. Google, its Translator and Wiki did all the intermediary work though lol.

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.
Credits of this chapter also goes to **Ari**, my proofreader.

Chapter 4: A genius in languages



TOCHARIAN



CHINESE

On the third day, we make camp beside a river in the midst of a dry season. Little monk and his mother begin their mantra chant and do not partake in the evening meal. I eat with the others, still the same Western Regions’ bread and hot noodles.

My tent is shared with other ladies-in-waiting, while the ‘noble’ monk gets his

own private tent and special treatment. Our classroom is thus set up at his place. When I walk into his tent and see the scene, I freeze. Jiba is shaving her son's head. Flecks of red hair fall down on the white cloth wrapped around his neck. He gives me a gentle smile and gestures for me to wait for a moment.

I begin to study Kumalajiba while waiting. His forehead is not pressed like his mother's. And how fortunate it is that monks in this time and place do not have the practice of burning dots* on their heads, or else in addition to the pain of flesh, the scarring would have destroyed his near-perfection face.

*Small, circular burns that are given to the monk when he ordains, created with small, coiled and waxed wicks.

When I think about this practice of burning dots, I cannot help but smile. It is originally a special custom from Chinese Buddhism. At first, like other countries, Chinese monks did not burn dots on their foreheads. It is said that this practice was started by Emperor Wu of Liang, a Buddhist devotee during the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The emperor tried to join the monastic life three times, but in all those three times, he was 'ransomed' back by his ministers using substantial offerings.

In order to spread the influence of Buddhism and increase the number of followers, Emperor Wu of Liang decided to pardon the prisoners on death row by forcing them to become monks. But afraid that they might escape and reoffend, the emperor issued an edict where, on top of the "Qian punishment" (tattooing the face with ink), he also ordered the dot-burning on the prisoners' heads to easily identify them during a pursuit.

In my opinion, this practice of burning dots on monks' heads stem from the rulers' intentions. Monks do not participate in economic production, do not pay taxes, and do not reproduce, so if their numbers increase too much it would adversely affect economic productivity. In addition, there is also the old proverb, "There are three ways to be unfilial, the worst is to not reproduce and discontinue the family line."* The history of suppression against Buddhism was often motivated by the need to maintain economic development and to protect societal ethics.

* 不孝有三，無後為大 originated from Mencius (Mengzi) in "Li Lou Shang"

However, the existence of religion is vital for rulers to keep society in order. For

that reason, the monastic must have identification and the government must regulate the number of followers tightly. A way to recognize the monastic is the presence of burned dots on their head. Those who shave their heads and pretend to be monks are thus easily identified. Fortunately, after liberation, the practice was abandoned, even though I heard that some temples still carry out the ceremony...

“Ai Qing!”

I look up with a start and see the little monk looking very eager. After shaving, he seems quite refreshed and cheerful. I look around. Jiba has already left without me knowing. I hurry after the little monk to a long table and begin our first lesson.

The little monk teaches me Tocharian first. Even though he is earnest and patient, given the limited Han level and how hard it is to remember Tocharian script, I find myself struggling and my forehead damp from the sweat. This is even harder than when I learned German. After an hour, exhausted in both body and mind, I beg for a break. My Tocharian lesson thus ends on a disastrous note.

After a quick break, it is now my turn to teach the little monk Han language. I used to teach the visually impaired as a volunteer every summer, so I am quite confident in teaching basic Han. Basic Han is not too hard to learn since it all starts with learning characters by sight. The problem is, ancient times have no notion of a phonetic system [ex. Pinyin], so it will be difficult [for him] to remember the correct pronunciation.

The method that was used in ancient times was called “fanqie”, which combines the syllables of two different characters (already known phonetically) to indicate the pronunciation of a new Han character. Usually, the onset (initial consonant) is represented by that of the first character; the final and the tone are represented by those of the second character. [example omitted]. The fanqie method uses a special dictionary called “Guangyun”*. But I am not a person from ancient times. I cannot utilize fanqie, nor can I apply the pinyin system, which is an invention two thousand years later. In the end I decide to teach by example—I would pronounce the character first, the little monk repeats it after, and then he has to learn it by memorization.

*a Chinese rime [yes spelled like that] dictionary that was compiled from 1007 to 1008

under the orders of Emperor Zhenzong of Song. Note, there is an earlier book that predates it, called Qieyun.

I pull out my scrap paper and pencils, drawing and lecturing at the same time. The little monk finds my stationery very strange. He keeps asking me how I obtained the glossy white paper and the pencil with the hard head. I can only lie to him that a strange person gave them to me, how I am the only one who has them in this world, and I do not know how they were made. After that, I pretend to be stern and ask him to focus on the lesson, no further questions allowed.

“日月水火土, 金木耳口手。”[1] To prepare for this time travel trip, I had to dedicate a year to learning how to write in traditional characters[2]. But I sweat just thinking about the seal script[3] used in the Qin dynasty. I can comprehend it, but writing it is a different matter. I hope I am not changing history as I speak. Fortunately, the little monk lives in the faraway Western Regions, and it would be hard for him to get to the Central Plains.

[1] a shorthand way of listing the basic Chinese characters, literal meaning is “sun moon water fire earth, gold wood ear mouth hand”; the full set has 80 characters

[2] Chinese writing system from 5th century to 1946, when the government introduced a new standard—Simplified Chinese

[3] Xiao Zhuan – ancient style of Chinese calligraphy developed in Qin (state), by the time of Han dynasty prominently used for engravings and seals, hence the name in English

The little monk used to learn Han so he can still remember some characters. He is very serious in his studies; his eyes stare at my notepad intently and his head bobs every now and then. The gentle smell of sandalwood from his body wafts in the air. My first teaching lesson wraps up in that sweet and comforting smell.

The next day, we continue on our journey. Communication between Kumalajiba and I has improved. He picks up after me quite fast. I just need to explain the meaning of a character once, and even if the character reappears in later lessons, he would not ask again. In addition, he also knows how to arrange words in a sentence in the correct SVO (subject-verb-object) order in Han grammar.

In this era, if I want to communicate with other Han people, I obviously have to use the classical way of speaking. But with the little Western monk, I still apply the 21st century way of speaking. Because he is a foreigner, I’m not worried that

he will find out the truth.

Kumalajiba likes to learn about the history, geography and customs of the Central Plains. I try to teach him using what I have learned in history books. The more I talk with him, the more I realize that besides his intelligence, the little monk also possesses a very impressive memory.

I ask Kumalajiba why he brings along an army when in fact, I want to find out his background. He tells me that they have been travelling across many countries over the last four years, but between them are miles of wasteland and deserts with no signs of life. Furthermore, all the places they passed by are areas with no governance and often subject to thievery. Thus they have to have an army along to protect their precious Buddhist scriptures and other valuable belongings. Xuan Zhang in his journey to the West also met numerous thieves. I nod my head in agreement over the wise practice of having soldiers along. But I still haven't uncovered the little monk's background, only that he left Kucha with this army four years ago. I guess that they must have some ties with the royal family, because only royal relatives would be able to bring the army along for protection.

Jiba silently follows behind us and listens to our conversation. Her expression always remains unperturbed and calm. Occasionally she would say a few words to her son. Even though I don't understand what she says, her gentle voice tells me that it is probably not a reproach regarding me. She conducts herself in an elegant and polite manner. I know she loves her son dearly, but she doesn't show any intimate gestures a mother would display to her child, perhaps because they follow the Buddhist way.

However, when it is time for chanting mantra, she becomes very serious. A pious and solemn look would reflect in her countenance, her eyes cast, as she chants together with her son. During those times, the two of them would block out all that belongs to the earthly realm, and focus their heart and mind on Buddha. Their chants resonate all around and seem to transcend beyond the physical. For the first time, I can feel the power of religion striking a chord deep in my heart. I stand outside their tent and listen to their chant, my mind lost in a daze.

In the evening we continue with our lesson. I struggle for a long time but

cannot seem to recall any words, so I obediently show my hands to the little monk.

“What is it?” The little monk learns modern Chinese from me so his words are not very formal.

“Hit my hands,” I tell him with a smile, “Our Han teachers always do this whenever a student makes a mistake. You see, I am very self-aware, so I can easily admit my wrongdoing.”

“You did what wrong?” Those light gray eyes of his glow brightly, almost as if they can see the depths of the person opposite.

“I forgot all the Tocharian—er I mean Kucha words that you taught me yesterday.” I pretend to be sad at first but then laugh at myself. Why do I keep calling it Tocharian?

The little monk also smiles, a smile as bright as the stars. “My fault not knowing how to teach, how can I blame you!”

He spreads out his left hand toward me, while his right hand grasps mine and hits it against his palm. It is not a hard hit, but I feel the sting nevertheless. He then says to me, “It is I who needs hitting. If tomorrow you still can’t remember lesson, I will take hit.”

I quickly take my hand back, touched by his words. I tilt my head and try hard to focus on the characters before me.

I achieve more progress in my learning than yesterday. Kumalajiba’s skill in Han also improves. I have finally finished learning the Tocharian alphabet. So I can remember it better, I carefully write down each letter with corresponding phonetic beside it. Kumalajiba keeps on praising my method, but I make him promise to not tell anyone about it, or else history may change.

“But why? You came up with it?” he asks.

I can neither deny nor confirm, so I answer in a vague way, “Han people don’t like women who are unusually talented, so if you tell others that I invent this method of writing phonetics, I will be seen as a witch and get burned alive,” borrowing from the story of Joan of Ark.

“The Han should not be like so.” After a moment’s pause, he looks at me solemnly and adds, “Humans are all same no matter what gender. Women are also intelligent.” The rest of it, he says in Tocharian, perhaps because his Han vocabulary is not adept enough to express his thoughts.

I smile. Such earnestness from a youth like him gives me such a warm feeling. But I have to change the subject soon because if we continue, I don’t know how much longer I can lie for.

“It’s good that you can think like that. Now, it’s my turn to teach you. Confucius, a great scholar from ancient China, said: Wēn gù ér zhī xīn, which means to practice what you learned, and from there you will learn something new. For that reason, I will now test you on the Han characters you learned yesterday.”

I place my scrap paper and pencil in front of the little monk. “Start writing!” I tell him. “One hit on the palm for every character you get wrong!”

The little monk smiles at me as he takes the paper and pencil. The way he holds the pencil is still awkward but he still has the look of a student. One by one all the characters from yesterday flow out of the pencil. How impressive! He actually remembers all of them!

A few minutes pass by with me sitting there stupidly, my mouth agape, before I finally regain the composure of a teacher. Humph, let me see if he can still escape my punishment with the next test.

“Pronounce each character out loud for me!”

He looks at me, eyes still smiling. As I watch him go through all 30 characters, not missing even one, my mouth goes slack. There is still an accent but as a whole, not one character is said incorrectly. Yesterday, I did not teach him how to write any phonetic! I wonder how high his IQ is?

“I respect YOU!”* as shocked as I am, this is the only sentence I can think of. I do not dare to say it aloud, of course.

*the “I” and “YOU” in this sentence were in English in the original text

I continue with the lesson. After I finish with the pictograms*, I move on to transformed cognates* (a method of using two Han characters to explain each

other with one condition: they need to have the same radical and similar meaning), and then to simple words.

*Chinese characters are classified into six types: two of them being pictograms (xiangxing) and transformed cognates (zhuanzhu); the other four are simple ideograms (zhishi), compound ideograms (huiyi), rebus (jiajiezi) and phono-semantic compounds (xingsheng).

I find myself a little bit upset. Even though we are both learning a foreign language, why is there such a big difference in ability? If we continue like this, the little monk will be writing essays in Han while I struggle with Tocharian vocabulary! Even more embarrassing, Kumalajiba has already learned to utilize the phonetic system I just taught to pronounce characters. Even though he is not completely accurate, he is pretty close.

Maybe I will have to step down from my job very soon in the future!

As always, if any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese history/Buddhism, feel free to comment on any inaccuracies or suggest a better substitute name/word/phrase. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated. Or any comments at all actually

Ch. 5

Ramblings: I started school again on Wednesday this week. Added onto that and my usual part-time job, I also have an internship going on this semester, and potentially a paid job in my field if all goes well (wish me luck!). Insane doesn't even begin to describe how busy I'll be.

Now, before anyone panics, the answer is NO, I am not dropping this translation project. I told you guys all that to give you a heads up. Ch.1-5 were done in the last week I had before school, thus the regular updates. Starting next week though, updates will be around 1 chapter every weekend (what I'm aiming for), possibly 2 chapters if I'm summarizing any of them, or there might be none a certain week if it gets too busy.

I do wish to see this project to the end, however long that will take, so I'll try my best. Reading your comments have been a huge encouragement, so thank you all! (That doesn't mean I'm condemning the silent readers though). Try and stick around with me, 'kay? I promise this novel will be worth it!

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Credits of this chapter also goes to **Ari**, my proofreader. My supposed beta-reader is MIA at the moment, and I don't know when she will return, so forgive us two if you find any errors. Just leave a comment and I'll fix it as soon as I can.

Chapter 5: Aspirations* and parallels

* See translation notes at the end



[Camel] bells rattle as the caravan makes its slow advance on the endless sand dunes. Eight days have gone by.

I wrap the shawl tighter around my head. Turning back, I put four fingers up in imitation of a camera's viewfinder and adjust the 'angles' to focus. In my imaginary frame, I capture a beautiful scene: Golden sunlight shimmers atop the endless line of camels, leaving behind a long trail of footprints on the glittering sand. A strong wind sweeps by, like waves crashing onto the shore, fading the footprints into a blur on the sand.

"Click!" I freeze the scene into a timeless 'photo', forever stored in the back of my mind.

"What are you doing?" the little monk asks.

"Nothing," I withdraw my hands. Unable to tell him how regretful I am for not bringing a camera, I can only sigh and say, "These footprints on the sand will soon disappear, just like the short life of a person."

I pull in the reins and jump down. I twist my body right and left three times each, shake my head and waist in an effort to warm up, or else my muscles will suffer from cramps later on. I look up and find Kumalajiba staring at me. With a grin, I continue, "Since the footprints will disappear sooner or later, I shall make good use of each step and persevere towards the end with a smile."

Taking hold of the reins, I tug the camel along with me on the sand. I wish to leave my footprints on this desert from a thousand years ago. Kumalajiba smiles, and copying me, he also steps down to walk. Moments later, two servants step up to hold the reins for us.

After a distance, we look back. Our footprints are lined up in a parallel. Suddenly I come up with an idea, "Come here, walk in front of me". He looks at

me confused but still complies. I trail after his footprints. He walks for a while and abruptly stops to turn around. I almost crash into him but manage to step aside in time.

“We should have been two parallel lines with no intersection in sight. By chance, the two lines are now fused into one.” To think, just eight days ago I was in a place a thousand years later from now! “Fate is really strange!”

“I think different. Having met you, that is the will of Buddha.”

I turn to him and catch his eyes, a pair of eyes as clear as a spring, the purest I have seen in twenty-three years of my life. I am just about to respond when I notice a figure approaching us from far ahead.

When the person reaches us, I realize he is a monk on an alms round*, thin as a rake, his face dusty from the sand. Along with him is a horse as thin as its owner. Kumalajiba hurries over. Jiba also jumps down and orders the caravan to a stop. Mother and son then clap their hands and respectfully greet the old monk.

*a Buddhist practice where monks and nuns go on daily round in the community to collect alms food from lay people; not the same as begging

They then offer food and water to the old monk, who receives and puts them away in the tattered bag slung on his back. After that, a conversation begins amongst the three. The old monk observes Kumalajiba for a long while and says a few words to him with a sad look. He then turns to Jiba, the both of them talking and looking at Kumalajiba at the same time, whose expression has turned disheartened.

A moment later, the old monk bids us goodbye and continues on in the opposite direction. Mother and son appear to be lost in their thoughts.

We climb back onto the camels and continue the journey. I silently guide the camel to where Kumalajiba is and ask, “Hey, what did the old monk tell you?”

Kumalajiba thinks for a bit before answering, “He told my mother to watch over and protect me. In the future I will succeed in revival and growth of Buddhism, salvation of the people, as great as Upagupta.”

“Who is Upagupta?”

“A famous monk from India, founder of dhyāna school.”

dhyāna is Sanskrit name for Zen (禪 in Chinese), a school of Mahayana Buddhism. I'm confused over the identity of Upagupta though. From what I found, he is Buddhist, but has no relation with the Zen school. Some stories in the Sanskrit text Ashokavadana say he was the spiritual teacher of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. Other sources say he is the 4th patriarch after Buddha.

“Wow, the old monk is impressive, he can even see the bright future ahead of you!” I then add, “I believe in what he said. You will definitely become a great monk and be revered by many.”

My words are from the heart. Even at such a young age, Kumalajiba has already demonstrated an extraordinary intelligence. His future will no doubt be remarkable. It is a pity that with my limited knowledge on the Western Regions, I cannot guess which famous figure he is.

Despite my praise, Kumalajiba does not seem to be happy. I have a feeling that those were not all of the old monk's words. “What's wrong? What else did he say?”

His gaze drifts faraway. A dejected look crosses his face. “Master also said, if I don't follow precepts* seriously, I will be nothing but a clever monk.”

*rules of conduct the monastic have to follow, taken as vows, similar to the Ten Commandment; will be discussed more in depth by the two of them in chapter 13

“Not following precepts? How can that be possible!”

His fingers grasp the reins so tightly his knuckles turn white. His head lowers, and the sound that comes out is airy. “Master said, if by the time I turn thirty-five—” the little monk pauses, a hint of blush appears on his usually calm face, and a faint fear passes by his eyes. But it is only a moment, and soon his face is calm again.

“By the time you turn thirty-five?” His expression tells me it is quite a serious matter.

He stays silent for a moment, then he answers in measured tone, “I don't know how to say in Han language.” That answer only makes me even more curious.

The little monk suddenly pulls his reins and urges the camel to run ahead, keeping a distance from me. Underneath the slanting sun, his thin body and flying cloak casts a dark and lonely shadow on the sand. I wonder to myself, did I

say something wrong?

A small woodland starts to emerge not too far away. The caravan has gone head to get ready to make camp. The person wearing the brown robes finally stops and looks back, waiting for me to reach his side. Then he continues on with me in a more relaxed speed.

Guilt briefly passes by his face. He clears his throat before asking me, “Ai Qing, why did you call bhikkhu* ‘old monk’, but call me ‘little monk’?”

*Pali/Sanskrit word for a fully ordained monk; the female equivalent is bhikkhuni

He is obviously trying to change the topic. As for his question, it is because I don’t know any Sanskrit. What does bhikkhu mean? And his name is hard to remember, what’s wrong with calling him ‘little monk’?

I ask him back, “Is there a Sanskrit title for monk* that is pronounced similarly?”

*‘monk’ here in Chinese is 和尚 (héshàng), in Viet it is hòa thượng

He shakes his head, “In Sanskrit, no, but in Khotan* (Yu Tian) they use “khosha”, which sounds similar to héshàng.”

*ancient Buddhist kingdom along the Silk Road

How interesting, it seems the term héshàng that we are so familiar with is translated from the Khotan language.

“But that only means one who has been ordained more than ten years, knows prātimokṣa* and able to ordain others. I am too far from that, how can you call me héshàng? Besides, I am not ordained, you can call me Sramanera [śrāmaṇera].”

*rules governing Buddhist monastic life

Sanskrit again. Seeing my confused look, he immediately explains, “Sramanera means those between seven to twenty years old, has taken vows of lower ordination but not the full ordination. After full ordination, they are called bhikkhu, meaning ‘seeker’*. Bhikkhu seeks dharma from Buddha and seeks alms from this world.”

*literal translation is beggar but I dislike using that word

Ah, I finally understand, no wonder these words sound so familiar. Sramanera is shāmí, bhikkhu is bǐqiū [same as héshàng], both are the result of Chinese

localization. It seems even among monks, there is a hierarchy of titles. But in China, people just call an old monk lǎo héshàng, a young one xiǎo héshàng [little monk]. Even immature little kids are called héshàng. I did not expect héshàng to be such a respectful term.

[T/N: #banging my head on the table# That, my friends, is translation in all its glory. Everything made sense in Chinese and Viet, but everything is lost in English]

I cannot help but smile. This calm genius boy has helped me build up considerable knowledge in Buddhism. So, even though I am older than him by many years, his maturity and wisdom make me feel like we are peers. And thanks to him, my arduous journey has now gained many joys.

As usual, after our evening lesson, I sit beside the campfire and write. Even though the oil lamp in the tent provides enough light to write, I still prefer this open-air environment. I often feel fascinated looking at the solitary skyline of the desert in this distant past. The wind tonight has changed its temper and quietly breezes by, teasing the firewood into a crackle. Eyes closed, I take a deep breath, turning my mind into a picture of peace and tranquility.

“Every evening I see you writing, what do you write about?” Kumalajiba still sounds a bit awkward in Han, but during these past few days, he has made quite some progress, his vocabulary has become much more colourful.

“Nothing, just a letter to home.” I initially move to cover it, but then I remember that he can’t understand it anyway, so I stop my hands.

“I do not understand a word you write.” The curiosity of a youth is a passionate thing. Eyes ablaze with excitement, he speaks in an eager voice, “The Han words I learned are too few, but I will learn harder, so I can understand what you write.”

I’m not so sure, little monk. My writing is in simplified characters.

I point to a spot beside me, “Do you want to take a seat?”

He is hesitant at first but eventually sits down, careful to keep a distance from me, and extends his slender hands towards the warm fire.

“Why do you want to learn the Han language?” I ask him.

“The Han [people] has many strengths: medicine, law, calendar, and [artisan]

skills are all better than Kuchan people. In my house there are many classics written in Han, I want to study them.”

He is indeed always eager about learning. I hesitate on my next question, but decide to go ahead with it, “You are so young, why a monk?”

I know my question seems out of line, but the little monk doesn’t seem offended. He looks at the fire intently and replies, “I became a monk when I was seven. It has been six years, and yet I have not thought about it until the past few days—”

“Wait!” I gesture for him to stop speaking. In a serious voice, I ask, “How old are you this year?”

“Thirteen.”

Thirteen! My mouth drops open. I have thought for certain that he is at least fifteen, sixteen. His tall figure, composed face and calm personality are like an adult, not at all matching with his real age. My God, that means he learned Han when he was eight, not eleven. Five years without usage and he can still hold a dialogue, exactly how many brain cells does he possess?

“Ai Qing, because I am tall, lots of people think I’m already sixteen.” He smiles sheepishly. “Please don’t hold my age against me. I will still study Han seriously.”

“Why would I hold it against you? You are my life saviour!” I pretend to be fine, but inwardly I am not. Does that mean I am older than him by ten years?? No no no, it is he who is older, older by two thousand years. Ah, relative age and absolute age, which one applies? The more I think, the more confused I get, so I stop. Time for a change of topic.

“So, have you figured it out, why a monk?”

He opens his mouth to say something, but then shakes his head. “It’s hard to say in Han right now. When I know enough Han to fully understand [why a monk], I will tell you.”

I can see that he is lost. I dare not discuss Buddhism, but still I want to give him encouragement. Looking up at the sky full of stars, I quietly tell him the ideologies from two thousand years later, “Where I come from, there was a great man. He divided human needs into a hierarchy with five levels. The most

basic of these are physiological needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter. Once these needs are satisfied, people will then move on to the need for safety. They will want their lives and possessions to be safe from harm. After these needs are relatively satisfied, people will then develop needs for love/belonging: family ties, love, friendship. Next comes the need for self-esteem, including both the respect of others and self-respect.”

Those are the four ‘deficiency needs’ according to Maslow’s [hierarchy of needs](#). I turn to him and catch his glittering eyes. I speak the next words more slowly, “But those are not the highest need. Humans only feel the happiest when their life aspirations* are realized [self-actualization], when their full potential is reached—they can accomplish anything within their given capability.”

*same as chapter title, see notes at the end

He looks at me, his eyes ablaze, and asks in a tight voice, “Aspiration?”

I nod my head vigorously and add, “Aspiration is what you want to pursue, the aim you will work towards in your whole life.”

He stays silent for a minute, then turns his blazing eyes on me, “Ai Qing, do you have an aspiration?”

“Of course!” I clear my throat and add, “Want to know what it is?”

As expected, he is curious, his eyes probing me to continue. I jump up, spread my arms toward the open sky, and say loudly: “I wish to experience history, witness the truth, and write it down in a record as renown as Sima Qian’s ‘Records’* !”

* Tàishǐgōng shū (Records of the Grand Historian), or simply Shǐjì (Scribe’s Records) – a monumental record on the history of China, spanning over 2000 years from the Yellow Emperor to Emperor Wu of Han.

I am finally able to voice out loud my unspoken dream. If I had said this in the 21st century, people would have laughed at me. But standing here before this gentle boy, I have nothing to worry about. Noticing that he has been gazing at me silently, I smile. “Am I too confident?”

He also stands up and nods his head in affirmation. When he speaks, the sound is not high, but full of confidence: “You can [do it]!”

I look at his eyes, clear as water, and feel deeply moved. I did not expect the

words of a youth like him to give me such joy and comfort. I imagine myself as an eagle, flapping my wings all around the campfire. Turning back to him panting, I laugh heartily, “You have to think about what your ambition is. One must live life with ambitions for it to have meaning.”

“Ai Qing, I still cannot fully understand what you said. But seeing you happy for having an ambition, I am moved!” Eyes glittering, he looks up at the starry sky and speaks in a louder voice, “I want to be like you and set an ambition to work toward in this lifetime.”

The crackling fire casts a shadow on his sculpted face. A breeze passes by and raises the fire sparks higher up into the air. Above, the sky is filled with thousands of stars fighting to shine. Below, tiny sparks of flame dance their way across the ground. Standing in between is this young boy with a warm smile. For just a moment, time seems to stop as I take in the captivating scene, yet another worth remembering for a lifetime.

Back in the tent, I find myself tossing and turning, unable to sleep because of the excitement from earlier. The homesickness I suffer every night has disappeared. Whenever I recall the words “You can!”, a feeling of warmth would rise in me. Softly, I say to myself, “Ai Qing, you can do it!”

Just as I am about to fall asleep, I suddenly remember that it is not until the Han dynasty does Sima Qian’s “Records” appear. I have inadvertently revealed a future masterpiece. How careless of me! I hope the little monk did not pay attention to it, and that he will not try to find the book in this era.

T/N: The original word is 理想 lǐ xiǎng (lý tưởng in Viet), which means “an ideal”, in the sense that it is a something intangible, some sort of ultimate standard, that you wish to work towards in your life.

As always, if any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese history/Buddhism, feel free to comment on any inaccuracies or suggest a better substitute name/word/phrase. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated. Or any comments at all actually

Ch. 6

Ramblings: Thank you everyone for your continuing support. Reading your comments have often made my day and motivated me to keep going. It will be a long journey translating this novel, but I think it'll be worth it with all of you guys. *wink*

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Credits of this chapter also goes to **Ari**, my proofreader.

Chapter 6: The first congregation*

*refers to a reading of and discourse on Buddhist scriptures

At noon three days later, an oasis emerges in front of my eyes. The past few days, I have grown tired of the monotonous desert. So when I see the scenery change into this vast greenery, I get so happy that I jump up and scream excitedly. Kumalajiba shakes his head in a sign, then tells me with a laugh that this is Wensu.

Wensu, he has mentioned this place in our first meeting. It sounds familiar. There must be a corresponding Han name, but I cannot remember it. While I rack my brain for the name, the caravan arrives at the gates. The air turns festive with Western [Regions] music and its cheerful tunes. A grand welcoming party awaits us ahead.

Several tents are perched along the road to the gates. There are no people inside, only Buddhist statues. Judging by the sculpting skills, I can tell that they are of high-value. People on both sides of the road stand up one by one, each holding a plate of fresh flowers, which they respectfully give to the monastic mother and son. The two then take the plates to the statues and scatter the

flowers around*.

*[Lương Hiền's T/N] The author based this practice on Xuan Zang's observance of the greeting when he was in Kucha in "Great Tang Records on the Western Regions". Xuan Zang lived in the Tang dynasty, two hundred years after Kumarajiva in this novel, so the custom probably has not changed much.

During that strange ceremony, I take note of the man heading the welcoming team. He is a man around forty years of age with a large and heavily built body. His hair is cut close to the scalp, braided at the back into long strands that are pulled into a topknot and wrapped in a gold cloth. He wears a crown carved with phoenix figures, a red gown sewn with diamond pattern and adorned with jewels. At the front are round shapes sewn with golden thread. And the pants— Oh no, my occupational disease is acting up again, always making me observe every single detail of the person opposite as if studying a lab animal.

Even though I don't understand what they say, I guess the group, consisting of royal family members and the man I observed earlier who must be the king, is here to welcome important guests. Although Jiba is treated with reverence, it is obvious the grand welcoming ceremony is meant for Kumalajiba.

I have always thought that Kumalajiba is no ordinary monk, but he is still only a thirteen-year-old with no major achievements to his name. He must have some other identity other than a monk, like being a member of a royal family. Could he possibly be a prince? Before enlightenment, Gautama Buddha was also a prince himself.

We are arranged to stay in a grand palace, not in a temple like I thought. I say grand, but it is not comparable to the palaces in the Central Plains. The Western Regions are a dry area where houses are simple, made mostly of wood and clay, and the roofs are flat. But houses made of clay are considered a luxury that is only allocated to government offices, temples and palaces.

Where we reside is a large wing with five rooms. The king even gives us ten additional people to serve our needs. I get my own room and a maid sent by Jiba. My first instruction to the maid is: I want to take a bath.

All the things novels often talk about like hot springs, fragrant flowers, large bath tubs, are nonexistent here. In fact, the conditions are somewhat poor, including the quality of the soap. However, I still feel extremely refreshed,

because after being steeped in sand for over ten days, I am finally clean.

When it is time for our evening lesson, unable to hide my curiosity, I try asking the little monk to tell me more about his background. But what I receive is an unshakeable calm face and a reply that says, “Things like eyes, nose, ears, tongue, body and mind are all not real, let alone names and identities.”

Buddhist philosophy again. Answering like that is the same as not answering. I shoot daggers at him with my eyes, “Yes yes yes, all phenomena in this world are not real. Just like Zhuang Zi* who dreamt he was a butterfly but when he woke up, he did not know if it was Zhuang Zhou [real name] dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was Zhuang Zhou.”

* a Taoist philosopher

I blurted out Zhuang Zi’s butterfly dream by accident, but it actually attracts great interest from the little monk, who insists that I tell him more. I guess I have to: “During the Spring and Autumn Period* in the Central Plains, there lived a philosopher by the name Zhuang Zhou. One day, he had a dream where he turned into a butterfly, a very happy butterfly that fluttered its wings around. Immersed in that joy, he soon forgot he was Zhuang Zhou. When he woke up, he was surprised to find that he was indeed Zhuang Zhou. Life is like a dream, so he was not sure if it was him dreaming he was a butterfly, or the butterfly dreaming that it was him.”

*approximately 771 to 476 BC; the period’s name derives from the Spring and Autumn Annals, a chronicle of the state of Lu between 722 and 479 BC, which tradition associates with Confucius.

The little monk is pensive for a moment, then says, “In India, there is a belief that everything is a dream of Brahma. When Brahma wakes up, the world will disappear, and everything is emptiness.”

I sigh. What a pessimistic argument. Not wanting to continue that line of thought, I ask him, “Is Brahma fàn tiān [Chinese name]?”

Brahma, it sounds very familiar. If I remember correctly, Brahma is one of the trimūrti* in Hinduism, the other two being Shiva and Vishnu, and is the god of creation. I have been to India and done some research on Hinduism, so I know a little bit about the topic.

*a concept in Hinduism in which the cosmic functions of the universe are personified by

the forms of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer or transformer.

“Fàn tiān?” Kumalajiba uses a pencil and writes the word onto my notepad. “You once told me fàn means equanimity, void of all desires. Brahma is the creator of the world and all things, so calling Brahma by the name fàn tiān is very clever. Ai Qing, I heard Buddhism does not thrive in the Central Plains, but with people as intelligent as you around, its [Buddhism] development will be just around the corner.”

I stammer in response, unable to get a word out. Once again I have inadvertently stolen the translation achievement of others! Kumarajiva*, Xuan Zhang, Yi Jing and countless other Buddhist translators, I’m sorry! I did not mean to do it!

*You might be wondering why Ai Qing hasn’t realized by now the ‘little’ monk is in fact the great Buddhist translator Kumarajiva. It is because his name in Chinese is 鸠摩罗什 Jiū mó luó shí, which is what Ai Qing is using here. Kumarajiva is a Sanskrit name. Alas, she fails to make the connection between the two.

Later during the night, a thought keeps dancing in my head. I have cut through space and time to come to Kumalajiba. Do I really exist? Perhaps I am not real? Could it be I am dreaming without knowing it?

It is the first time I think about my presence in this place with such a sad feeling.

For the time being, we settle down in Wensu. I ask Kumalajiba when we will go to Kucha; after all, I am far more interested in that kingdom than this small one. However, he tells me he has been invited to hold a Buddhist congregation at a major royal temple, and that he has reserved a guest seat for me.

That is why I am sitting here next to Jiba, my curious eyes roaming everywhere. It is quite a magnificent hall. A statue of Gautama Buddha, gilded and around two meters in height, is placed on a base in the center. Surrounding the hall are narrow passages for Buddhist followers and tourists. The main hall is held up by wooden columns and clay walls. Light can only come through the main door, so oil lamps are lit everywhere in the hall. This temple design is typical of Theravada Buddhism*, which has many differences compared to Mahayana Buddhist* temples in the Central Plains later on.

*two branches of Buddhism, will be discussed by the two later on in the chapter

[the next few paragraphs are summarized]

Kumalajiba begins the congregation by chanting mantras along with other monks (nearly a hundred). Also in attendance is the royal family. I try to chant whatever little mantra I know of and repeat it five hundred times. After that, Kumalajiba begins his lecture. This reminds me of my trip to Egypt some time ago, where I visited the great Mosque of Muhammada Ali. I came right when the preaching started. However, since I was not a Muslim and did not know any Arabic, I soon became bored. But when I looked at the solemn and pious faces around me, I dared not leave, lest I cause some major disrespect. Once again, I find myself in the same situation with Kumalajiba's congregation.

I dare not leave, not when the royal family is also in attendance. I also don't dare to sketch or take any notes, lest I call unwanted attention to myself. So, after repeating my usual method of observing and naming things five times, sleepiness begins to overcome me. However, I cannot fall asleep in the middle of this large crowd, so I secretly shake my arms and feet on the mat, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

[end of summary]

I feel somebody's gaze on me. It turns out to be Kumalajiba. I pout and stick out my tongue at him, then rub my sore bottoms. His mouth twitches, trying to hold in laughter. Then he speaks a few more words and stops completely. Everyone stands up and salutes the little monk with folded hands. I quickly follow suit.

After giving some concluding remarks, the king then claps his hands to call in the servants. A row of them immediately enter, each holding a small tray-table full of food that gets placed before each important guest. Everyone else in attendance gets food served directly to their hands [a figure of speech]. I stare at the food with a dumbfounded look.

There are fruits characteristic of Xinjiang like grapes and muskmelon¹. Naan² is also present. But what is that? This grease and wonderful aroma...grilled meat? It looks like lamb skewers³. Xinjiang's lamb skewers are famous throughout the country. I swallow my saliva; it has been nearly ten days since I last ate meat. But

strangely enough, the king, other secular guests and all the monks also get meat. The entire hall is suddenly filled with the aroma of grilled meat. The king gives order to start the meal. Chewing sounds begin to fill the air.

¹ most likely referring to Xinjiang's famous Hami Melon (Hāmì guā) a.k.a sweet melon

² I've been calling it Western Regions' bread based on the Viet version, but the Chinese text refers to naan bread (a type of leavened flatbread), makes perfect sense, I should have realized it earlier

³ Chinese text only says 羊肉 yáng ròu, meaning lamb, but my research found that Xinjiang is particularly famous for lamb *skewers* aka chuan/chuanr



I look over to where Kumalajiba is sitting and notice he too is eating meat. Even though his [eating] movements are elegant, they still give my eyes a shock. Then I suddenly recall that these monks follow Theravada Buddhism, where the rules allow monks to eat meat. I have to ask Kumalajiba later to make sure. I try to take a bite of the meat—not very tasty, seasoned only with salt, no chilli or cumin, not as good as the skewers sold at the stall in front of my school.

After eating a bellyful, I have to use the toilet. I feel depressed just thinking about the long 48 days ahead. When I return, Kumalajiba is already waiting by the door, basking under the glow of midday sun. Squinting his eyes, he smiles at me, “Ai Qing, I know you do not understand [the lecture], making you sit would be uncomfortable. I have asked the king to exempt you from the next lectures.”

Fantastic! I jump three feet high and am about to grab him for a hug, but then I remember he is a monk and halt my actions. I thank him quickly and run off. His voice chases after me at the back, “Go practice the Kucha words you learned yesterday. If by tonight you don’t remember, a hit on the palms!”

He comes to the evening lesson, punctual as always. In the afternoon, I took a nap and then proceeded to sketch the architecture of the temple, the main hall and the congregation scene that I saw. All done, I sit waiting for Kumalajiba.

I successfully pass my Tocharian test. Now is my turn to teach him Han. I quickly ask him the question I’ve been holding back the whole afternoon, “Why

do you [monks] eat meat?”

He appears surprised, “We follow the Hinayana* , of course we can eat meat. But only ‘triple clean meat’ [三淨肉 sān jìng ròu].”

* will be discussed later

“What is considered triple clean meat?”

“First, you have not seen the slaughter, meaning you haven’t witnessed the miserable scene of a dying animal. Second, you have not heard the slaughter, meaning you haven’t heard the dying screams of the animal. Third, the animal must have not died because of you, meaning it was not because you want to eat that it was slaughtered. For example, if you go the market and see the butcher cutting up meat, or hear him say it is fresh meat, then that meat is not ‘clean’. Or if you go to someone’s house and the host slaughtered a duck for the meal, it means a being was killed for your sake, and thus cannot be considered ‘triple clean meat’. To sum it up, ‘triple clean meat’ means when it is not seen, not heard, and not suspected that the living being has been slaughtered for oneself.

* ”

* from Majjhima Nikaya 55.5 (Jivaka Sutta)

After Mahayana Buddhism spread into the Central Plains, its rules prohibited any form of killing, and thus no monks could eat meat. So in our minds, monks are vegetarians. Xuan Zang in “Great Tang Records on the Western Regions” had discussed this issue. The great monk wrote that during his journey to the West, he could not become accustomed to seeing the monks there eat meat.

“But why did we not eat any meat on our way here?” I ask. I have thought they are not allowed to eat meat because I have not seen them doing so in our journey.

“Because before we met you, we have already eaten them all.”

I nod, finally understanding. I wonder, seeing these monks eat meat like this, would the monks in the Central Plains be jealous or affronted?

“You mentioned Hinayana earlier, sounds familiar, what does it mean?”

He thinks for a moment before explaining in a series of strange sounds. I know it is not Tocharian, so it must be Sanskrit—the standard language used in Central

Asia. It is also the language Kumalajiba used in the congregation today, which is why I did not understand a word.

I hear him saying another sound: Mahayana. When I travelled to India, I had brought along ‘Lonely Planet: India’ in English (the world’s most authoritative and most popular self-help travel guide series). I remember seeing ‘Mahayana’ often on pages about famous attractions [in India]. It must have something to do with Buddhism. The little monk just said he follows Hinayana, and therefore is allowed to eat ‘triple clean meat’. Ah ah ah, I remember now.

“Those words mean dà shèng [大乘] and xiǎo shèng [小乘] right? Mahayana is dà shèng, and Hinayana is xiǎo shèng.”

Seeing his confused face, I write out the characters for dà shèng and xiǎo shèng on paper.

“乘 shèng means ‘vehicle’, referring to the path of a bodhisattva who seeks enlightenment to liberate all sentient beings, like a boat that helps people cross to other side. Hinayana emphasizes on liberating oneself, thereby becoming an arhat, and is thus called xiǎo shèng [small vehicle] in Han. Mahayana emphasizes on liberating others, helping them reach enlightenment, and is thus called dà shèng [great vehicle].”

I am so proud of myself. See, I even know Sanskrit! However, when I catch the little monk’s shining eyes and knowing smile, I suddenly feel startled.

“Ai Qing, I told you, you are very intelligent!”

I, I, I...have once again stolen someone else’s translation. Jiū mó luó shí [Kumarajiva]’s translation, it seems. I’m sorry, I did not mean for it to happen...

T/N: The two main schools of Buddhism recognized today are Mahayana (it does mean ‘the Great Vehicle’ in Sanskrit, so the Chinese localization is correct) and Theravada (lit. ‘the School of Elders’). Hinayana (which does mean ‘small vehicle’) is often used as a synonym for Theravada. Xiao Chun (the author) seems to suggest the same thing here, which is not quite correct. This is not her fault since there is a lot of confusion/debate even amongst scholars themselves.

If you wish to understand more about the differences in these terms/concepts,

read this resource:

<http://online.sfsu.edu/rone/Buddhism/Misconceptions%20about%20Buddhism>.

As always, if any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese history/Buddhism, feel free to comment on any inaccuracies or suggest a better substitute name/word/phrase. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated. Or any comments at all actually

Ch. 7-8

Ramblings: I had a day off from school/work and it turned into a quite productive day for FBFY lol. I ended up finishing ch.7-8, which I already started last weekend, and went to finish ch.9 later at night. Ch.7 I only translated half and summarized the rest, hence why it's being combined with ch.8.

If you have read my [Translation Approach](#) post, you'd have known that I don't intend to translate all the chapters in detail (for various reasons). Ch.7 is one such chapter. However, it's not a hard and fast rule. I'm still open up to opinions and ideas. So please tell me what you think about the summary. As in, does it seem awkward or out of place in ch.7? Anything I should change in the summary in terms of style and such? Do you wish for me to actually attempt the chapter in full instead?

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning. Credits of this chapter also goes to Ari, my proofreader.

Chapter 7: The debate

No longer needing to attend lectures also means I don't have to get up early. Now I just wake up whenever I want, do my hygiene routine, eat breakfast and head out onto the streets. Don't be mistaken, it's not a leisure walk but a field research. This two-thousand-year-old town may be small in area and population, but it is still the first ancient town I have set foot in. I might as well do a practice field research!

I set out with my backpack on my shoulders, containing all sorts of things like sketchbook, measuring tape, writing tools, small shovel and so on. My goals are to measure the walls, the thickness of the earth, note down the gate locations and sketch the palace exterior. I am in the midst of my work when a group of men suddenly appear behind me and point spears at my back. I quickly put my

hands up in surrender and ask them to not kill me. My measuring tape falls down onto the ground and unrolls into a long line.

I get thrown into the prison designated for Han spies. I am dumbfounded. What kind of spy would walk around so blatantly like me? I try to use all the Kuchan words I've learned to explain that I am an acquaintance of the great monk Kumalajiba. That I met their king and queen yesterday, even attended the banquet in the palace. I beg them to find Kumalajiba. But after several hours went by with no one coming to bail me out, I resign to continuing my research in jail.

So when an anxious Kumalajiba shows up later, he is greeted with the sight of a girl immersed in her work despite the surroundings, busily measuring and sketching in her cell.

The sun has begun to set when the two of us exit the prison. He probably had just finished the afternoon mantra before hurrying over here to get me. The mere thought makes me feel guilty. He told the guards that I am his Han teacher, and all of a sudden, everyone appears very respectful towards me. For that brief moment, I became a fox who got to wear a tiger's cloak [Viet idiom].

Like I predicted, when our evening lesson comes, Kumalajiba immediately asks what I did during the day to end in jail. Having prepared my answer, I reply smoothly, "You remember our talk about aspirations? I told you I want to write a historical record that will get passed down through generations to come. If I want the future generations to know about the glorious past of the Western Regions, I have to collect all the relevant information." He listens to my rambling for a while, then promises me that he will try to explain to the king, but also tells me to be more careful.

I spend the next few days holed up in my room fixing my sketches and improving my Tocharian. But by the fifth day, I have had enough. I set out onto the streets but this time, heeding his words, I act more prudently. I observe everything carefully and return to my room afterwards to sketch. This is the only way I can conduct my research, unless I want to draw in jail again.

Ten days pass by like that. My sketches have accumulated considerably.

During one evening lesson, I notice that Kumalajiba appears more distracted

than usual, seemingly lost in thoughts. When I ask him, he tells me that he has been challenged to a debate tomorrow. This makes him quite anxious. I ask what the topic is about and he says it will be announced on the day. I then ask who his opponent is, and he tells me it is a famous debater who has been unrivalled in the entire Western Regions. The man does not think there is anybody who can defeat him, and said that if such a person exists, he will cut off his own head in offer as an apology.

“Do you want to come [to see the debate]?” the little monk asks hesitantly, probably thinking about how badly I behaved in his first congregation.

I nod quickly, “Of course I want to go!”

Such an interesting contest with such a scary penalty like that, along with an arrogant prick, how could I possibly miss it? I quickly ask, “Do you know where bets are placed? What are the current odds? 5-5 or 4-6?”

But seeing his dark face, I cease my question.

In order to allow him time to mentally prepare for tomorrow, I end our lesson sooner than usual. Noticing his worried expression before leaving, I quickly call him back. Imitating the classic cheering I often see in Korean dramas, I lift up my right hand and shout, “AZA, AZA, FIGHTING!” [original Chinese text wrote like that]

He looks at me strangely. I giggle and shout happily, “That is the words from a peninsula in the north-eastern region. It means: Our little monk will definitely win!”

His mouth curves into a brilliant smile. All the worry in his eyebrows has lifted. Copying me, he also lifts his right hand up. The action is a bit clumsy but full of confidence, and his usual calm is finally restored. This is his first smile tonight. The glow of confidence from that brilliant smile lights up the entire room, basking me in its warmth.

I actually do not sleep in the next day. Instead, I wake up early in the morning and wait at the door.

[T/N: The rest of this chapter is about the debate, which is too philosophical for me to translate. While interesting, it is merely a recount of a factual event

that doesn't further the plot much. I decided to summarize it instead.]

The debate occurs in the main chamber (the same one used for the congregation). The king and queen are in attendance and are the only ones sitting besides the debaters. The chamber soon gets completely packed with people standing.

During these times, debates were a method used by religions to attract followers. In India, the debates often resulted in tragedies. The loser will tend to disappear afterwards. Some even cut their tongues or commit suicide. A lighter penalty would be to shut down their school and study under the winner instead. In contrast, thanks to that one debate, the winner's reputation will spread far and wide, causing much reverence and attracting numerous followers. The king will treat the winner with respect and make him the grand master. It is thus easy to see how important this debate is for a young monk like Kumalajiba, and why someone usually so calm like him would get so nervous the night before. [This paragraph is straight from the novel.]

As expected, I cannot not understand a single word said in the debate, so I end up observing the audience and the debaters' expressions instead. I can tell Kumalajiba is doing very well. He grows more passionate as the debate goes on. His body leans forward and his arguments seem to overpower the opponent, a non-Buddhist man in his forties. In contrast, his opponent grows more despondent by each second, no longer acting high and mighty. His voice gets smaller, and then with a pale face, he falls over and admits defeat.

Kumalajiba wins to the cheers of everyone, including the king and queen. The king rewards the little monk with numerous chests. He then sets out onto the streets atop an elephant and gets paraded by lots of flowers and praises. I am in awe myself. Our little monk is only thirteen, yet he was able to defeat someone more than 30 years his senior. I wonder how much more amazing will he become in the future?

Later in the evening, I ask him what the debate topic was. He tells me it was on [śūnyatā](#). He took the emptiness position. [And then goes on to explain the debate to Ai Qing]. Even though his opponent promised to give his head if he loses, Kumalajiba has no use for it and instead forces the man to become his student and a follower of Buddhism.

[Ai Qing then engages in a mock debate with Kumalajiba over what it means to win or lose. She wins (which I think might just be because she blurts out a long argument with no pause in Han, making it hard for him to respond). The next day, Kumalajiba meets the other debater and exchanges a few words in a respectful manner. It is not clear what is said, but the man thanks the little monk profusely and quickly returns to his room, probably to pack up.]

Chapter 8: The great monk

After the debate, Kumalajiba's fame spread far and wide. Wherever he goes, he'd be surrounded by people giving him flowers and trying to touch his sleeves. Even an insignificant teacher like me also gets swept along in that fame. When I'm on the streets, occasionally there would be someone who gives me scented oil, flowers, meat and so on. The prison guards who previously captured me now greet me with a bow of respect. More importantly, Kumalajiba's victory in the debate makes it easier for me to conduct my field research. I no longer have to meet wary eyes or fear being thrown into jail.

Another ten days pass by. Using my fingers to count, I estimate there are only ten more days until Kumalajiba ends his Buddhist lectures, after which we can finally go to Kucha. After spending more than a month here in Wensu, there is no place that I haven't passed by less than three times. I thus look forward to our journey to Kucha.

The British historian named Arnold Joseph Toynbee was once asked where he wanted to be reincarnated in his next life. This was his answer: "I want to be reborn in Kucha, part of Xinjiang, a place where two thousand years ago was the crossroad of numerous cultures and ethnicities." After reading this answer, I become very curious about everything that is Kucha: Kuchan music, Kizil caves, Subash the lost city, and the most famous figure from Kucha – Jiū mó luó shí [Kumarajiva] ! I wonder what Mr. Toynbee would think if he knows his dream is about to be realized through me?

With such thoughts, I conclude our next lesson in high spirits. I just taught Kumalajiba the Analects. There are other classic texts like the Three Character

Classic*, but I neither have the book with me nor remember which era it was from. To be safe and not mess up history, I decided to only teach him the texts that were written before the Han dynasty. The first text is of course the Analects, next is the Classic of Poetry, and after that is the Commentary of Zuo and Strategies of the Warring States. I hope that this [tutoring] will give me enough pocket money to travel to Chang'an.

* not one of the traditional six Confucian classics, but rather "the embodiment of Confucianism suitable for teaching young children." Source: Wiki

Just as he is about to leave, Kumalajiba turns around and tells me casually, "The Kuchan king will arrive here tomorrow. We have to go greet him. You as well, Ai Qing."

I am still immersed in my planning when he says it, so it takes a while before I can respond. "Why is he coming here?"

"To meet me and my mother."

What? A king is travelling all the way to another kingdom to get the mother and son, how unbelievable! I immediately pull him back by the arm.

"Tell me, who exactly are you? The Kuchan king is your father right? You are the crown prince? If not, why would the king travel a thousand miles to come pick you up?"

Kumalajiba pulls back his sleeves from my grasp and shakes his head, "Don't say that. I am not a prince. Besides, Kucha is only three hundred miles from here, not a thousand miles away. And things like identities and backgrounds-"

I interrupt him, "Are all non-existent! I know you would say that!" The less he says, the more I get curious. He chooses not to answer me, but others might. My Tocharian has improved, no longer limited to simple alphabet like before.

I give him a sly grin and block his exit at the doors, "Let's review Kuchan language. My mother is _____, my father is _____, my brother is _____"

He lets out a heavy sigh, "Alright, I won't hide it from you anymore. Might as well tell you myself than let you find the answer from others." He looks at me with shining eyes and tells me carefully, "I am not a prince. The Kuchan king is

my uncle. My mother was a princess, the king's sister."

So they are indeed related to the royalty. No wonder they always have such a noble aura around them.

"And your father?"

"He came from Tian Zhu [India] and was supposed to inherit the throne but denounced it to become a monk instead. He then crossed the eastern mountains and came to Kucha. The Kuchan king asked him to become the State Preceptor [Teacher of the State], and had him marry the princess, my mother that is."

Wait, this story sounds very familiar... I am certain I have heard it somewhere before. A light bulb goes off in my head. I quickly ask him, "You also have a brother right?"

He nods, "Younger than me by three years."

"Your mother originally did not speak any Sanskrit, but after she was pregnant with you, she suddenly knew how to speak it?"

"That is a rumour. My mother learned Sanskrit from my father."

"Then, am I correct that at seven, you followed your mother's footsteps and became a monk, and at nine, you travelled to Kashmir and what else, Gandhara and Ka-something. The word is very difficult to write!" I struggle to remember the place.

"Kabul?"

"That's right!"

"When I turned nine, my mother and I travelled to Kabul, where I studied under xiǎo shèng [Theravada Buddhism]."

"That means you, you, you-" I stutter, unable to go on. I know who he is now! I hit myself on the head. How could I be so stupid and make such a grave mistake!

After the Qin dynasty is the Han dynasty, correct? He had told me the Central Plains is currently ruled by the Qin/Qing, but has always talked to me about Han people, Han language. If the current dynasty is Qin as in Qin Shi Huang*, then why would he call me a Han person? When he said Qin, I had immediately assumed it was the famous Qin dynasty in history. In addition, we are so used to

calling ourselves Han that it became a habit, making me forget that the name derived from the Han dynasty*. A student researcher majoring in history like me has made such an unforgivable mistake!

[Here’s a history refresher instead of making you refer to ch.3]. Qin dynasty refers to the first imperial dynasty in China from 221 to 206 BCE. Qin Shi Huang (or Shi Huangdi) was the first emperor and the one who unified China into one state. Han dynasty succeeded the Qin dynasty and lasted from 206 BCE – 220 CE.

Of course, it cannot be the Qing dynasty, because by that time, Kucha would have been buried for over a thousand years. Then is there any other period that is called Qin?



Yes! There are Former Qin founded by Fu Jian and Later Qin founded by Yao Chang*. The adjectives ‘Former’ and ‘Later’ were added on by later generations to distinguish between the two. In their time, they were simply called ‘Qin’. This means I am actually in the Sixteen Kingdoms period*. It also means that I have landed five hundred years later than what the researchers predicted. I’ve been spending the last few weeks with a famous historical figure without even knowing it.

* Former Qin (351-394) and Later Qin (384-417) referred to two states during the Sixteen Kingdoms period (304-439), which was also part of the Jin dynasty (265-420).

That figure is the nephew of a Kuchan king during the Sixteen Kingdoms period, a genius with the IQ of 200, a monk of noble descent that is revered by many, a young man with a godlike appearance, and the person that was voted as the greatest monk of all times by us history students in the dorms.

The Book of Jin* wrote: “One day, Kumarajiva was teaching at Caotang Temple and in attendance were the emperor, court officials and over a thousand monks.

All of a sudden, he stepped down, approached Emperor Yao Xing and said: ‘Two children kept dancing on my shoulders, please grant me a woman.’ Yao Xing immediately recruited ten women as offering. Soon after, one of the them gave birth to twin sons.”

*official Chinese historical text covering the history of the Jin dynasty from 265 to 420

My jaw had dropped when I read this part. Such audacity! It’s true that history has recorded numerous monks who got involved in sexual scandals. One example is the monk Bianji—Xuan Zang’s most capable assistant in translating Buddhist texts—who committed adultery with Princess Gaoyang (Emperor Taizong’s favourite daughter) for several years. But that affair happened in secrecy. When the Emperor found out, he ordered Bianji to be executed.

But in the case of Kumarajiva, whether you look at it from the viewpoint of Buddhist ethics or secular morals, to openly ask for *that* kind of favour in such a sacred setting is appalling. For a monk to completely disregard his precepts [vows] and express his sexuality so publicly, it is unprecedented! When Yao Xing offered him ten women, he even gladly accepted it. Unlike other monks who lived in monasteries, Kumarajiva had his own private residence. He lived with his wife, children and concubines like a secular person [in those times]. And yet, none of these occurrences reduced the people’s respect for him. Later generations continued to praise him and his fame even spread to overseas. Such a monk, isn’t he the greatest one in history?

I once again recall our discussion in the dormitory where six people had unanimously voted Kumarajiva, the famous Buddhist translator monk from the Sixteen Kingdoms period, as the ‘greatest monk in history’.

“You...you...you are Jiū mó luó shí! Jiū mó luó shí? Gosh, you are really Jiū mó luó shí! You are that famous historical figure!” I blabber on incoherently. My head is spinning. My mind is a mess. I’m like a fan who suddenly gets to meet her celebrity idol. This time-travel trip is not bad at all. I now have something to brag about when I return!

A glass of water is placed before me and a damp cloth is put on my forehead. I look up to see his eyes, clear as a lake, filled with worry.

“Your forehead seems hot, maybe you are catching a cold. Tomorrow I will ask

someone to boil some medicine for you to drink,” he says.

I see my trembling hands and feet reflected in those bottomless clear eyes. I drink the water and become calmer. I give him an embarrassed smile, “Sorry, I Was overwhelmed.”

He smiles back, “I’ve never seen Ai Qing like that. And you keep calling me Jiū Mó Luó Shí, is that my Han name?”

I nod. Kumalajiba is his Sanskrit name. “Qīū Mò Ruò” is “Jiū Mó Luó”. But how did “Jíbō” become “Shí”? [read T/N at the end]. I don’t know who translated Kumarajiva into Han, but it clearly sounds better than what I’ve been calling him so far. I failed to recognize him because I had the history period wrong. Furthermore, “jībō” and “shí” are two separate sounds. I thus did not realize I’ve been spending the past days next to a top translator monk in China, one who rivalled with Xuan Zang.

I ask him the meaning of his Sanskrit name. He tells me that ‘Kumara’ is his father’s surname, meaning ‘boy’. ‘Jiva’ is his mother’s name, meaning ‘long life’ (old age). His Han name thus means ‘mature boy’ [advanced in his years]*. Naming a child using the father’s surname and mother’s given name is an old Indian tradition. Sometimes other meanings are added to the child’s name, and that is why old Indian names are very long. No wonder I could not seem to remember the names of monks in Buddhist history books. They are truly long and hard to read.

*ahahaha that explains a lot, prophecy anyone?

I know his father’s name is Kumarayana and his mother’s is Jiva, both of which are familiar to Han people. Western [Regions] and Indian monks often used their given names, different from monks in the Central Plains who used titles.

Kumarajiva places a piece of paper before me and asks, “Can you write out my Han name?”

I carefully write out each character: 鳩摩羅什

He examines it for a while, reads it out loud once, and looks up at me. His expression is bright and happy. “Great! If this is the name Ai Qing gives me, then from now on my Han name will be Jiū Mó Luó Shí !”

I look up in surprise and see a pair of shining eyes smiling at me. My mind becomes a confused mess. There are no records on the person who gave him his Han name. Could that person be me? The name I read in the 21st century is the same one I give him 1650 years prior. Does that mean my time-travelling here and meeting him is inevitable? How is that logical? Am I just an outsider travelling on the edges of history, or am I now unwittingly a participant in this period?

T/N: Well, if you are confused with the names, I apologize. This is what happens when you translate not from the original text but an intermediary language. So apparently in ch.2, when they first met and exchanged names, Ai Qing tried to pronounce his name using Han syllables.

Based on the pronunciation, I manage to find corresponding syllables in the Han language: Ku-ma-la-ji-ba, indeed quite hard to say. I try anyway, “Ku-ma-la-ji-ba, Ku-ma-la-ji-ba, Ku-ma-la-ji-ba...”

At the time I was translating that chapter, I have not yet started cross-referencing with the Chinese ebook. I was relying only on the Viet version. Lương Hiền (the translator) chose to write out as such to fit with his Sanskrit name. In reality, the original text wrote that Ai Qing called him “Qīū Mò Ruò Jíbō”. I did not realize it until now, though I should have.

Alas, I’ve been using Kumalajiba in the past chapters, and you guys are probably used to that name by now too. I myself are used to Kumarajiva so I find it hard to switch to the Chinese name (Ai Qing finds this easier to say but I find it harder to type lol).

So I am deciding to keep using the Sanskrit name instead of the Chinese one. I hope any Chinese purists out there will understand.

Another thing to note, in the next chapter, Ai Qing will call him only “Luó Shǐ”, corresponding to ‘Rajiva’, which the Viet version used. I have always referred to our little monk as Rajiva so I’m going to use that name as well.

As always, if any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese

history/Buddhism, feel free to comment on any inaccuracies or suggest a better substitute name/word/phrase. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated. Or any comments at all actually

Ch. 9

Ramblings: Ch. 9 is shorter than other previous ones so I had meant to post it with ch.10. However, I've been having a hard time staying awake at night (get really sleepy around 8pm) these past days... Probably have something to do with my fluctuating sleeping schedule. Have to get back on track soon.

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning. Credits of this chapter also goes to Ari, my proofreader.

Chapter 9: I want to resign

The next day, I accompany Kumarajiva, his mother, the Wensu king and his ministers to the palace gates to greet the Kuchan king. Now that I know he is Kumarajiva, I finally figure out why Wensu sounds so familiar. Wensu is a county under the Aksu Prefecture and part of Xinjiang Province. Two thousand years ago, it was only a small kingdom that was dependent on Kucha.

The reason why I remember this small kingdom's name is because of Kumarajiva. That debate he did was recorded in history as the 'Wensu Debate', and represented an important turning point in his fame as a youth. History books wrote that it was thanks to this debate that Kumarajiva's fame "echoed throughout the Pamir Range and spread across the seas", and he was then "greatly sought after by many kings". That is why the Kuchan king had to come here himself to get Kumarajiva.

The welcome ceremony is very grand. A red carpet is laid down all the way to the palace. There are music and fresh flowers thrown everywhere. I recall that this [Kuchan] king is named Bai Chun. The Bai dynasty began with Ban Chao, who set up his Western Regions' fortress at Kucha. From the times of Ban Chao to the end of the Tang dynasty, after which it was destroyed by the Uyghurs, in those eight hundred years, Kucha was always ruled by the Bai

family.

This Kuchan king shares many similarities with Jiva: white skin, tall nose, big and deep-set eyes, long and thick eyebrows. Bai Chun is probably not yet in his forties. He must have been quite handsome in his youth, but now he is somewhat out of shape. The king doesn't cut his hair shoulder-length like other men. He leaves bangs in the front and pulls the hair at the back into a top knot, which is wrapped in a colourful strip of cloth with ends hanging at the nape.

Interestingly, his forehead is also flattened [like Jiva's]. Xuan Zang had written about this Kuchan practice in the Great Tang Records on the Western Regions. The Kuchan used a wooden board to press down a child's forehead. However, this practice was limited to royalty only. Fortunately, Kumarajiva became a monk at a very young age, or else his handsomeness would have been destroyed by the practice.

I continue to observe the king's clothes. Like other [Kuchan] men, he also wears a collared tunic with tight sleeves and knee-high boots, but added to the ensemble is a half-sleeve cloak embroidered with complex gold patterns. Fastened around his waist are a long sword and a two-edged dagger. The king seems to be fond of swords.

His eyes finally catch sight of Kumarajiva and his mother. The king immediately strides forward and grabs the two of them in a hug. Mother and son seem very emotional; after all, they have been away from home for four years. I can only understand parts of their conversation. The king congratulates Kumarajiva on his studies and victorious debate. He also tells them that everything has been prepared in Kucha to welcome them home.

When the king's eyes fall onto me, he appears slightly surprised. I've been trying hard to listen to their Tocharian and fail to notice his gaze in time. Not knowing how to respond, I give him a dazed smile. My smile has not yet faded before a feeling of unease arises in me. I am done for. All the etiquette I've learned has been for naught.

The Kuchan king also stays in the palace but in a different residence. The evening banquet carries out as usual in the main chamber. I also get to join in.

However, since Kumarajiva and his mother do not eat dinner [Buddhist rules], I only get to drink water. My mouth salivates at the sight of the two kings enjoying their grilled meat. There is no music or dancing, simply a family reunion meal. It soon becomes boring and I find myself jiggling my body to ease my muscles.

I catch a familiar gaze watching me—Kumarajiva’s. He is pressing his lips together to hold in laughter. I quickly sneak a look around to make sure nobody is watching, then I pinch my nose and stick out my tongue to tease him. The little monk presses his lips tighter, painfully trying his best not to laugh. He then turns to the two kings and mentions how late it is; the Kuchan king has had a long journey and needs to rest early. After that, everyone raises their wine cups (water for us) one last time and ends the banquet.

I return to my room with an empty stomach and blurry eyes from hunger. I quickly tell the servant to find something for me to eat. While waiting for the food, I lie down on the bed to reduce physical exertion and conserve energy. In my haze, a wonderful aroma suddenly wafts up my nose. I immediately jump up and find a pair of eyes like pools of water smiling at me. In his hands is a plate of grilled meat with a to-die-for smell!

I wrap my arms around his neck, “Rajiva, you are the best!”

I have thought hard about how to address him. His Sanskrit name is too hard to say and his Han name is too formal. A variety of documents that talked about him sometimes used Luó Shí [Rajiva], sometimes only Shí [Jiva]. Ancient documents used Shí while modern ones used Luó Shí. Strictly speaking, Jiū Mó Luó [Kumara] is his surname and Shí is his given name. However, calling him Shí only is too weird. So after much thinking, I decide to call him the modern way, Luó Shí, and he accepts it gladly.

*T/N: Just pretend you never read this paragraph and just know that she decided to call him Rajiva.

When I let go of him, I realize his face is as red as a tomato. He averts his eyes, unable to look at me. His embarrassment, so pure and innocent, is adorable.

Oh, but what have I done? I knock myself on the head. Startled, he asks me,

“Ai Qing, what’s wrong?”

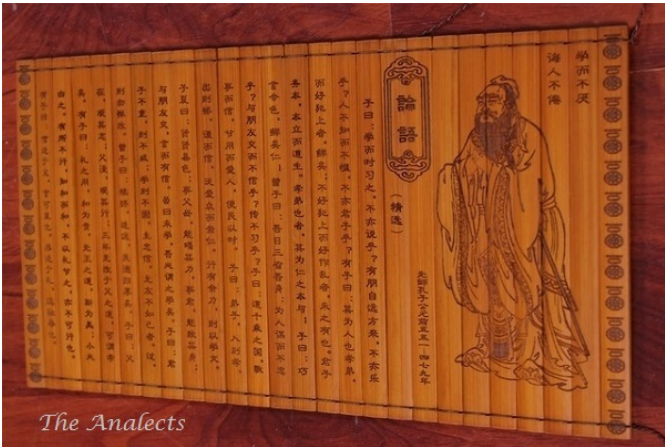
Staring at his embarrassed face has me embarrassed as well. I take the plate from his hands and pretend to be starving as I gobble up the food to hide my chagrin. How to tell him how much I regret my thoughtless action? Even if he is young, I still cannot use such modern intimacy with him, for he has a special identity that can never be changed.

It takes a while before Rajiva resumes his normal expression. He tries to ask in a nonchalant voice, “What are we learning today?”

I sigh and stop eating, “You should find someone else to teach you, I can no longer do it.”

The redness that has just faded from his face has now turned ghastly pale. “Why? Did Rajiva do something wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong. It’s because I am not fit to teach you. You are Kumarajiva after all!”



When I teach him the Analects, I neither have the book nor remember everything. I only teach him what I remember, which of course means the order of the chapters are mixed up, and even in the chapters I do know, there are still some missing parts. He is a genius that can remember everything after hearing it once. If I continue with my sloppy teaching, I will fill his head with wrong things. Then how can he become the greatest translator monk in China? I cannot bear such a heavy responsibility. His Buddhist career in the Central Plains is still awaiting him ahead!

“But, but, you teach very well!” There is a slight tremble in his voice. “Your teaching is very interesting, so I can remember after hearing it only once.”

“That is because you are a genius, not because I teach well,” I look into those

clear eyes and tell him seriously, “Rajiva, you are the smartest person I’ve ever met.”

In a voice as soft as a full-bodied wine, he replies in an equally serious tone, “Ai Qing, you are also the smartest woman Rajiva has ever met. You know so many things and most importantly, you understand Buddhist concepts very well. With a teacher like you, Rajiva has come to care about the Central Plains. Rajiva wants to set foot in that place, to see with my own eyes what kind of soil, water and air it has that gave birth to a woman as intelligent and beautiful as Ai Qing.”

Those warm words, spoken with so much sincerity, give me a small boost in confidence. A thought pops in my head. Could it be his interest in the Central Plains actually derived from me? But the truth is I am not smart at all. I had even stolen others’ works, including Rajiva’s translation. And yet he still praises me. In modern times, I would have already been sued for copyright infringement.

With such thoughts, I hang my head, unable to look at him squarely, “But...”

When I finally find the courage to look up, I see that he is trying not to laugh at my forlorn expression. He then says to me, “Well, if you don’t have that silly expression on your face all the time, you would appear much smarter...”

This brat, how dare he make fun of his teacher! I jump up and try to catch his neck, but fast as a lightning, he laughs and escapes my hands. I chase after him round after round. He has youth and long legs on his side, making it hard for my old legs to catch up. But I do not believe I cannot catch him, because if so, me being born ten years before him is meaningless!

I let out an “ouch” sound and fall onto the ground. As predicted, he hurries over and asks in an anxious voice if I’m hurt. Seeing his guard down, I quickly grab his neck.

“You brat, let me see if you can still call your teacher silly from now on! It’s not a ‘silly’ but an ‘honest’ face, you hear me? Even if you are Kumarajiva, in front of me you must still be obedient!”

I shake his neck and watch his face becoming redder and redder. Did I use too much force? I quickly let go and lean closer for a better look, “Hey, was I

too strong? Are you in pain? I'm sorry!"

The eyes on that flushed face try to evade me again. He turns away and puts some distance between us. Then he mumbles in a tiny voice, "Ai Qing, continue to teach me please?"

I sigh and put a hand on my chin, "But I have no lesson plan or textbooks. The Analects that I taught you was from my memory, filled with many holes and errors. There is an old saying that goes like this: 'If you are going to teach wrong things, then you are better off not teaching, else you risk ruining the student.'"

His face is still red but his bright eyes face me head on. His lips are curving into a blinding smile, "You worry about that? That's not difficult!"

Oh, *to teach or not to teach, this is a question* [original in English]. I have no way of declining, but I'm still afraid of teaching him the wrong things. I should not have appeared in his life. Without me, he can still become a great monk in history. But what if it is the reverse? What role do I play in his life journey? Will I be a bad influence and inadvertently change history? At the very least, if it wasn't for me, he would have not known any modern Han words.

Seeing my extended silence, Rajiva covers my hands with his. The warmth quickly transmits throughout my body. "Ai Qing, the Buddha has let me meet you. I value this fateful encounter greatly. I sincerely want to learn Han, but if you do not want to teach, that is fine. But at the very least, come with me to Kucha before returning to the Central Plains, please?"

In his shining gray eyes, I see a reflection of my dejected face. I am merely a passerby. Even though my time travel watch is currently broken, sooner or later I will have to return to my era.

But my time travelling and meeting Kumarajiva in his youth, besides the word 'fate', what else can explain it? Our two lines of footprints by chance merged into one, but it is only temporary. Soon, no intersection will be possible. Then why worry so much? I just need to be more careful from now on and not let my modern characteristics show, and history will thus be unaffected. But more importantly, I truly wish to stay beside this prodigy and continue to receive his warmth.

“That being so, I will continue to teach you,” I stand up and shake the dust off my bottoms, “Let us student and teacher review where we left off yesterday.” I must correct his modern Han into the classical way soon.

He appears both surprised and happy, perhaps not used to my formal way of speaking, but does not ask any questions. He quickly goes to find some paper.

The next day, I find him at my door carrying a copy of the Analects.

As always, if any reader knows Chinese or is well-versed in Chinese history/Buddhism, feel free to comment on any inaccuracies or suggest a better substitute name/word/phrase. Comments on grammar and spelling mistakes are also appreciated. Or any comments at all actually

Ch. 10

Ramblings: [imagine that I'm prostrating as you read this] I can only begin by offering a sincere apology to all of you loyal readers, old and new alike, for my disappearance over the last few weeks. Life has been throwing lemons at me, and hit me square in the face every time. In my last post, I said I was recovering from a cold and exam season was coming up. That was all true. But then I also discovered that I have bacterial infection in my stomach shortly after (probably caught it when I visit Viet Nam over the summer), so then a week-long treatment began. And of course assignments must still be handed in, exams must still be taken. Everything pretty much just finishes last week. I am completely recovered (I think, doctor said to check back in 2 weeks), and finally found the time and mood today to translate. So here I am.

Does this mean my posting schedule will be back on track? It should, but I've learned enough to not make promises I can't keep. But I do promise to try, so that means a chapter or so each week again.

I was eager to post this new chapter up so I did not send to **Ari** to proofread. There are probably many spelling and grammar errors, please excuse them (unless they are major, then by all means, tell me in the comments). Until next time, then.

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 10: Leaving for Kucha

We finally set off to Kucha. The farewell party is quite lively with Wensu citizens arriving from all directions onto the streets. Even the Wensu king also goes to see us off. He travels with us on horseback for about ten miles.

It is really different to travel with a king, unlike when I was with only Rajiva and his mother. This time we get special treatment befitting of royals. Every day, Rajiva still comes to my tent for our lesson after his afternoon mantra. Now that I have the actual book, my lessons are more complete and in depth. Whenever possible, I try to use specific historical events to explain the complex philosophy of the ancients. This earns me much admiration from Rajiva.

One time, King Bai Chun (of Kucha) comes by the tent to test my teaching. He speaks Han fluently. I am lecturing on the Anelects, Book 9: Zi Han*. He chooses one quote from that book to test me on, which is: “Master said: I have not seen one who loves virtue as he loves beauty.”

Zi Han means Master Shunned, as in subjects that Confucius seldom spoke of. The quote’s translation I got from this [source](#), but the word “beauty” is a euphemism, the meaning is closer to “sexual appeal” or “lust” in my opinion.

This is an easy quote to explain. I think about it for a moment, then reply: “Confucius lamented that people values beauty more than virtue. But since everyone wants beauty, lust is thus the basic nature of humans. There is a natural pull between people and beauty, indescribable but also very strong. Gao Zi once said: ‘The needs to eat/drink and have sex are basic human nature.’ But virtue is not. Those who value virtue do not do so out of a human need like sex. People are always like that, past or present.”

I pause. Ban Chun does not say anything in reply, but I also feel his gaze is not very warm. Ah, why I did speak so honestly like a child and tell him lust is basic human nature? Why did I not remember that no matter when, kings always like to shout mottos and value appearances?

I hasten to add: “But 色 [first character of the word “beauty” above, meaning “color”] does not refer exclusively to sex, but to all that is beautiful. And 德 [virtue] is one of those beautiful things. Those who value both virtue and beauty are called junzi [superior person/ ideal man]. The reason for Confucius’ lament was because after years wandering place to place, passing by almost every state, he still could not find a home, simply because he had not met a ruler who loves virtue as he loves beauty. But had he lived to this day, and met a great ruler such as your majesty, certainly he will not utter those laments any longer!”

The expression on Ban Chun’s face remains unchanged. I panic, wondering if

my “kissing up” is that ineffective. The old proverb “Building relations with a king is like playing with a tiger” is really correct! This man is only a king of a small country in the Western Regions. If he is Qin Shi Huang [first emperor] or Emperor Wu of Han, how scarier would it be? If I displease them even in the slightest, I can easily lose my head. A cold shiver rolls down my back. I can only peek at the king. Ban Chun does not even pay attention to me. He speaks a few words with Rajiva in Tocharian before stepping out.

The next day, he talks about me in front of Rajiva and his mother: “This girl is too young and has a frivolous attitude, not befitting for a teacher.”

I almost lose it out of anger. Does he assume that I do not understand Tocharian, or does he not care whether I understand or not? It must be that silly smile I have. I have barked up the wrong tree yesterday by choosing him as an object for flattery. I do not know which words had offended him.

He then says that after upon arrival in Kucha, he will find another teacher for Rajiva, and further adds that there are many great Han teachers in Kucha. Rajiva thanks him but declines the offer politely, praising me as the greatest teacher he has ever met, and that I am knowledgeable, meticulous and patient. Ha, he did not let me down. Ban Chun then turns to persuade Jiva, but the beautiful nun replies that she respects her son’s wishes.

Jiva is indeed a great mother! No wonder Rajiva always looks up to her with respect. Ban Chun of course is not happy about this, so I smartly keep my head lowered, as if I did not hear anything.

We continue on our journey through Bai Cheng. Our eyes are no longer filled with scenes of the desolate desert. In its place is a ravine between mountains with no vegetation in sight. Under the sunlight, the scenery before me is as epic as the Grand Canyon in Colorado, U.S. We begin to approach the mountain range known as [Tian Shan](#).^{*} Rajiva tells me that after we cross this valley, and another twenty miles of desert, we will reach the border of Kucha.

^{*}They are one of the longest mountain ranges in Central Asia and stretch some 2,800 kilometres (1,700 mi) eastward from Tashkent in Uzbekistan.

A small river appears in the middle of this dangerous valley. Where there is water there is oasis. On both sides [of the river] are steep cliffs. This is the hub of

the Silk Road. A few farms and inns can be spotted along the way. Rajiva tells me that is the Muzat River, and the mountain's name is Karadag. I find these names very familiar. There are tens of miles from here to Kucha, so what is so familiar about this place? I take another look at the mountains, the river flowing around it, the green oasis and the cliffs on both sides. Suddenly a place comes to mind: Kizil Caves of a Thousand Buddhas.

“Rajiva, the Kizil Caves are in this place, correct? Could you please show me the way?”

I am incredibly excited. The Kizil Caves complex is located in the westernmost region, and the first to be built in China. The site's value lies in its murals; their beauty rivals that of the murals from Dunhuang [referring to those found in Mogao Caves in Gansu province]. Factoring in time, these murals actually came into existence before the Dunhuang murals by more than two centuries. The art style is heavily influenced by Hinayana, characteristic of Kucha, and serves as a wonderful source of information about the kingdom. Unfortunately, later on, a group of Uyghurs who followed Islam have caused significant damage to the artwork. In addition, in early 20th century, a German scientist interested in the East, A. Von Le Coq had also come by and took numerous valuable murals*. If I can see with my own eyes these murals, completely whole during this era, and copy them down, oh how invaluable that would be!

* I'm not sure about the fact about Uyghurs, but the one about the German is incomplete. von Le Coq actually led a German expedition team with Albert Grünwedel to explore the Kizil Caves, the first serious study of the complex. While the latter was primarily interested in copying the murals, von Le Coq chose to remove many of the murals. Most of the fragments removed are now in Museum of Asian Art in Berlin. Other explorers removed some fragments of murals and may now be found in museums in Russia, Japan, Korea and United States.

“What Kizil Caves are you referring to?”

Rajiva seems to not understand. Maybe it is because Kizil is Uyghur language and at this time, it has yet gotten the name Kizil Caves of Thousand Buddhas.

“It's a Buddhist cave temple cut along cliffs, and inside there are numerous paintings and caves extending thousand of miles [not U.S. miles, real length approx. 3km].”

Bright-eyed, I excitedly describe to him, but Rajiva still does not seem to understand. He takes another look around and pauses in front of the mountain opposite.

“Ai Qing, there is no cave here like the one you described.”

What? Can it be Kizil Caves have not yet been built? Historical records show that construction began around the 3rd or 4th century AD until the 8th and 9th century, when it slowed and eventually stopped. So that means it would have started around this time, no?

“Ai Qing,” Rajiva suddenly narrows his gaze, “How do you know a temple like that will be built here?”

My forehead begins to sweat. That’s right, how would I know such a thing? The earliest Thousand Buddhas caves, which have not yet been built here.

“I...”

I give him a weak laugh to gain time, then point a finger toward the path full of twists ahead.

“I thought to myself, this is a path the traders must definitely cross on Silk Road, which is full of dangers and treacheries, such as bad weather and roaming bandits. There is a constant threat of becoming empty-handed, or losing their lives, along the way. That is why they need Buddhism to sustain their spirit, to wish upon them luck and safe travel. If a temple is built here, those traders will definitely stop by and ask the Buddha to bless them. Moreover, this place is quiet and peaceful, quite fitting for a monastic life.”

Rajiva’s face is smiling and his eyes shine brighter each passing second. I sigh in relief. Ji Xian Li* once said that merchants and Buddhism have an interdependent relationship. Major donations made to temples are generally from merchants [or businessmen in today’s time]. This is the reason why Buddhist temples and monasteries were often built along the Silk Road. And it was through this road that Buddhism spread into the Central Plains. Therefore, the explanation I gave Rajiva makes perfect sense.

* a Chinese professor in Asian Studies on many topics, one of which was Buddhism, voted as the Great National Teacher. He was still alive when Xiao Chun wrote FBFY, but has passed away in 2009, aged 98.

I observe the surrounding mountains and shake my head. “As for why rock-cut caves, it’s because this place is a valley with not many trees. In order to construct a temple made of wood, one must transport materials from somewhere else, a costly endeavour. Moreover, buildings made of wood are hard to maintain. Thus, building the temples on the sides of the mountains is the best option.”

Rajiva nods in agreement, “The cave temples you described are very similar to temple architecture in India and Kabul. There, they build temples on the sides of the mountains because all the major routes are through mountains.”

He ponders for a moment, then turns around and asks me, “But why do you call this temple “Kizil”?”

I gape at him, still more questions? Why is this kid so smart!

“Kizil, Kizil...” I mutter the name under my breath, trying to think, “It’s a dialect. In my hometown, Kizil means ‘cave’.” How fortunate, I manage to invent a good explanation because he is a foreigner [as in not Han].

He looks at me for a long while, and just when I am about to crumble under my own lies, he suddenly smiles and nods, “What Ai Qing said is very rational.”

He pauses to think for a bit, then continues with his questioning, “Then according to you, how should this cave temple be designed to reflect the grandness of Buddhism?”

“That...” I have set myself up, so I might as well see it to the end, lest the modern Kizil Caves change its design. I hesitate for a long while, but finally decide



to express all my thoughts.

[T/N: She then goes to describe the architecture, which is too long and descriptive and confusing for me to translate. Refer to the end of chapter for further reading links and photos.]

“Ai Qing, you must have been to India and Kabul, right?”

“Huh?”

It is true that I once travelled to India. However, the political situation in Kabul [capital of Afghanistan] at the time was quite complicated, so I did not have to chance to visit the place. In early history, Kabul was a famous ancient city located at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, the capital of the Kushan Empire founded by Kanishka the Great, and the place where the Buddhist art style Gandhara [classical Greek met Buddhism] originated from. Kabul is also a place I have always wished to visit.

But the problem here is how do I continue with my lies? It is clear that the architecture I just described does not exist in the Central Plains or even in the Western Regions. But if I say that I have been to those places [India and Kabul], I will be found out immediately. His father is Indian, and Rajiva himself has lived in Kabul for a few years.

“Um ah I...by chance I once met an Indian monk, and he told me-”

He interrupts me mid-sentence, “Since when does Ai Qing understand Sanskrit?” Under his keen eyes I have nowhere to hide.

“I...”

It is as people say, lying once is easy but to maintain that lie, you have to invent many more lies and in the end you still get found out.

“Ai Qing, you do not know how to lie at all!”

“I...” so I am exposed in the end. How could I be so fearless earlier, telling one lie after another without any thoughts?

“Who are you exactly?”

Another difficult question, my head is dizzy from its force. “I...”

I forgot that this brat once defeated the greatest debater in Western Regions. If he continues to question me, it will be very hard to keep my secrets!

“All right, don’t worry.” Seeing my red face, he laughs, “If you don’t want to say, I will not force you to. I will persuade the king to build this cave temple when we arrive in Kucha, and call it Kizil Caves of a Thousand Buddhas. And of course it will be built according to the description you gave me.”

He looks at me with shining eyes, shakes his head and smiles, “Ai Qing, do you know that your expression earlier was very silly? Regardless of where you come from, you are still the most wonderful woman Rajiva has ever met.”

My cheeks feel less hot, but my mouth still cannot close. Unbelievable, the Kizil Caves of a Thousand Buddhas was built just like that! I hit my mouth lightly in self-punishment, silently promising not to speak carelessly anymore in the future. How can I possibly bear the crime of changing history?

I turn back and realize my self-punishment action was caught by Rajiva, how unlucky! He does not say anything but his eyes look as if they are trying to work out a puzzle. From then on, I tell myself to not blabber so much.

At last, we arrive in Kucha. The welcoming party that greets us is even grander than the one in Wensu. From far away, one can already hear the celebratory music. There are tents running for hundred of miles from the gate. Before each tent is a senior-level monk, who press their hands together as we approach. Rajiva and Jiva immediately dismount and return the formal greeting. I only have eyes for the Buddha statues inside the tents. I wish there is a method for preserving them until modern times!

Leading the welcoming party is a middle-aged woman, stout and healthy, dressed in an elegant robe sewn with glittery cloth. Must be the queen! The group of women and children who are dressed similarly behind her must be the concubines, princes and princesses. After them must be the court officials, around a hundred in total, who are bowing toward their king. The atmosphere is quite serious. In just a few minutes, I have already been able to see the entire royal family and court of Kucha. I wish I have a camera to capture this scene.

The queen embraces Jiva and Rajiva with brimming tears. Both Rajiva and his mother are also red-eyed. It has been four long years of missed moments. I notice a person in that royal family standing behind the queen, whose appearance is unlike any other Kuchan.

The person is a middle-aged man with dark honeycomb skin. His stature is tall and thin, his back straight and his face contour narrow. His deep-set eyes are at the center of a rugged face, the pupils a light grey, giving off an intelligent and kind expression. He does not let his hair grow to shoulder-length like Kuchans, but cut it short like the style in modern times, although hints of grey have started to show. Even though he is wearing a Kuchan outfit, I can still easily see that he is from India. At his age, to use the word “handsome” to describe him would be demeaning. It cannot capture the aura that exudes from him, an elegant aura that makes him stand out amongst a hundred, that compels others to notice, and once they have noticed, they cannot pull their eyes away.

He brings along a boy around ten years old with a round face and skin as white as other Kuchans. The lines on his face are exactly like Rajiva, but much more adorable! He even shares the same grey eyes, which are busy looking everywhere. Once they spot me, he appears surprised, and then keeps staring at me. I smile at the boy and secretly make funny faces. Startled, he turns his face away.

No doubt about it, that Indian man must be Kumarayana, who once gave up the throne to become a monk, who crossed the Pashmir mountains in the east [of India] and arrived in Kucha, where the king made him the state preceptor. He is the man who became husband to the princess Jiva and is the father of Kumarajiva. The little boy whose face is similar to Rajiva must be his younger brother. I cannot remember what his name is. Hui Jiao in “Monk Stories” only wrote one name, meaning that in the development of history, the boy only exists because he is Kumarajiva’s brother.

The queen has stopped crying. She brings Rajiva and his mother over to Kumarayana. Jiva clapped her hand together in Buddhist greeting toward the man who was her husband [after she joined monastic, earthly relations cease]. Longing is clearly evident in Kumarayana’s deep eyes. He must also want to hug her, but in the end he only looks at her silently for a few seconds, and returns the formal greeting. The naughty little boy has no care and just dives for his mother’s arms, crying out loudly. Jiva hugs the boy back, tears brimming in her eyes. Rajiva prostrates himself before his father [in reverence], but Kumarayana quickly helps him up. Both of them seem very emotional and begin to talk softly

in Sanskrit.

The welcoming ceremony has lasted for more than an hour. Kumarayana asks the king for permission to bring his wife and children home [to their residence]. Jiva does not decline [she does not live there], probably because she also misses her family. And so I go along with Rajiva's family to their residence.

I have already found out from Rajiva his brother's name, which is Pusyseda*. It is a Sanskrit name, yet another name hard to pronounce.

*That is the spelling the Viet translator used. I have searched high and low but was unable to confirm if that is really his Sanskrit name. The Chinese text uses Chinese obviously, but in keeping with the rest of family, I choose to use the Sanskrit version.

T/N: Phew, that was long. This was why I found it so hard to start translating this chapter since it was so intimidating.

I originally wasn't going to translate that conversation Ai Qing had with the Kuchan king over virtue vs. beauty. The general meaning of the quote makes sense in English, but the wording and all is very Chinese, and that translates fine in Viet, but sounds awkward and at most crude in English. However, after weeks of not looking at this chapter, I come back working with a fresher mind. The whole conversation seems insignificant and weird, but actually makes sense in the larger theme of the novel, which discusses and perhaps critiques Buddhist view on earthly desires (sexual relations being foremost). You will get my point later on.

It was the same with Kizil Caves, I wasn't going to translate it either. Well, okay, I thought I was going to translate maybe 1/3 of this chapter and look where I am. You all probably realize by now that I am fond of history and all that jazz related to it. Kizil Caves complex, as Ai Qing said, is quite a monumental site. Its significance in Chinese history and in Buddhism is no joke. From an architectural and artistic perspective, the site is such a wonder to behold. Moreover, that part of the novel shows that Ai Qing's presence in the past is not just as a mere passerby. Her appropriation of translation words were not as a big deal as this. And last but not least, the only visual depiction of Kumarajiva comes in the form of a statue located at the entrance to Kizil Caves (photos [here](#) and [here](#)), which Ai Qing will mention later on.

If you are interested in finding out more about the Kizil Caves of a Thousand Buddhas, here are the resources I found in my research:

- China Travel Guide: [link](#)
- University of Washington: [link](#)
- Closer study of the artworks in the caves: [link](#)

Ch. 11

Ramblings: I should probably stop with apologies at this point. Long story short: assignments, exam season (finishing this week), internship, and work. I have been translating ch.11 here and there, and was finally able to finish today, since I wanted a break from all the law stuff cluttered in my head.

Anyhow, my winter break starts next week so I should be able to update more often. That said though, ch.12 and 13 are very long, so we'll see.

Also, thank you everyone for your kind comments in my last post. My health is fine now (relatively). I will try to take care of myself better. I have too many things I want to do to have time for illnesses lol. As always, all of your encouraging words help me find motivation to keep going. A big hug to all of you, old and new, silent and commenting readers alike.

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 11: I gain a new student

Jiva and Rajiva only stay at home for three days, after which they move to the newly built temple. It is a royal temple located on the west side of the palace—a 15-minute walk from the state preceptor's residence [where Ai Qing is]. Before he leaves, Rajiva has made sure all the arrangements are in place: As his Han teacher, I can continue to live in his residence, and every day he will come home after his afternoon mantra for our usual lessons.

My plan to travel to the Central Plains is put on a hold because it is currently winter. The snow has blocked all the roads, forcing the merchants' caravans to halt their journey. If I wish to go, I will have to wait until spring of next year. Oh well, I am not in a hurry anyway. I have just arrived in Kucha and have not even

begun my research yet. Moreover, my Tocharian skill is still inadequate. Since someone is willing to provide me room and board, there is no reason for me to refuse.

My host, Kumarayana, is very kind, polite and attentive. His refined aura is like that of a university professor. If my school has a professor like him, I am certain all the girls would race to register for his class. There will not be enough seats, and even the hallway will probably be full. If he teaches Sanskrit, Professor Ji will not have to worry about having no students willing to learn the language. Kumarayana trusts me completely, never once questioning my teaching methods. And after hearing Rajiva's praise, he even suggests that I take another student.

I eventually find the opportunity to make a few rounds around the ancient Kuchan citadel. This kingdom has three palaces, all heavily guarded by a garrison. The main palace [for royal family] is quite magnificent. Its total area is larger than the palace in Wensu by five, six times. Buddhism is welcomed here. Everywhere I go, I always spot temples, pagodas, both big and small, built in clusters.

Kucha faces the Tian Shan range to the north, and is seen as a kingdom rich in freshwater in the Western Region. As such, agriculture and animal husbandry are able to thrive. The Tian Shan is also full of minerals such as copper, iron and gold, enough to supply all the surrounding countries. Furthermore, Kucha is situated on the Silk Road, enabling trade to flourish at the same time as handicrafts. Kucha is thus the wealthiest kingdom in the Western Regions.

Every day, teams of horses carrying silk would stop by the main road points. Goods are traded and sold constantly amongst the flood of merchants and buyers. The entire city looks like an exhibition of diversity: there are the Yue Zhi people, the Wusun, Xiongnu, Turks, Xianbei, Rouran, Mongolians, Persians, Iranians, Indians, even the people from Europe like Greeks and Romans, and of course a great many Han people. Every time I walk on the streets, I always pause to watch, mesmerized, as the throngs of people in all kinds of colours and clothes pass by me. Only when my new student, who has been my guide, looks up in contempt, do I reluctantly continue on our way.

Speaking of which, this new student is currently my biggest source of

headaches.

This milky white skin, very cute boy who is busy using my pencils to doodle on my sketchbook, after which he would switch to using my erasers to rub them out, rinse and repeat. The boy sees my reusable stationery as his latest toy, and keeps using them to draw the whole day.

I stand by and watch him in pain.

“Oh young master, little lord, little devil! You think my house is a store that sells stationery? The eraser only half a piece, the pencil only half a stick, and three pages of my sketchbook gone so unjustly! Do you know all these writing instruments are non-renewable resources? If you use them up, where can you find them in this era to compensate for me?”

I actually still have some left in my bag, but since I do not know how long I will be staying here, I have to be thrifty.

The brat ignores me and continues to draw. Which might be because I spoke in Han. But after seeing my fourth sheet of paper “pass away”, I have had enough. I yell in Tocharian: “Stop your drawing!”

Even my lioness’ roar is not enough. He looks up and bats his big round eyes at me. Eyes exactly like Rajiva’s, a light gray inherited from their father, and curly red-brown hair from their mother. He looks at me for a long moment, then drops the pencil, climbs down the seat and dives into my arms.

“Then you must sing for me!”

Not again! A while ago, Kumarayana went to Gumo on some business and did not return for a few nights, so the brat snuck into my room one night and insisted on staying with me. To make him less of a pest, instead of useless shouting, I ended up singing nursery rhymes to him. Except after that night, he came back and demanded me to not only sing every night, but also to not have any songs repeated. So my modern songs have turned into lullabies! How ludicrous!

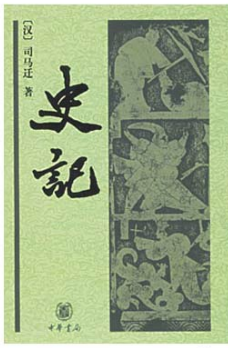
I let out a sigh and scoot over to give the boy space on my stool. Patting his back, I begin to sing Wakin Chau’s [“My Dearest Baby”](#). The little guy closes his eyes, revealing long lashes that only add to the high bridge of his nose, quite an

adorable picture!

I can understand why the little guy sticks to me like glue. Both his mother and brother left to serve the Buddha when he just turned six—four long years without any correspondence. His nanny, who has taken care of him since young and the one he was closest to, has passed away couple years prior. Even though the house is full of female attendants and nannies, they cannot give him the motherly love he needs. At this age, he needs friends, and even though every day he is at the palace studying with the princes, by the time he comes home, there is no one for him to play with. His brother is only three years older but is like a little adult, and there is also the distance of four years they spent apart. Every time he sees Rajiva, he becomes very shy.

My appearance here fulfills both the mother role and the playmate role—someone he can be pampered by. His naughty antics are only meant to attract my attention, to make me care about him. But all of that only makes me suffer! Every day I have to play countless roles: At one point I am a soldier under the great commander forced to give daily reports, then an enemy fighting against the commander, and finally the defeated who begs for mercy with a white flag. Day after day playing with such an energetic child, I am weary to the bones.

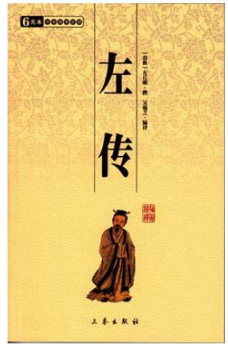
When the last note of the lullaby finishes, I find that he has fallen asleep. I then carry him to the bed. Massaging my aching shoulders, I mutter under my breath, “Little guy, you are too heavy, soon I won’t be able to carry you anymore. Already ten and yet still so playful. I just sang you one song and you’re already



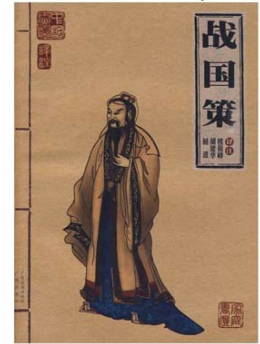
Sima Qian's Records



Book of Poetry



Commentary of Zuo



Warring States

asleep.”

It has been snowing the past few days. I am a Jiangnan* person, and despite the climate change going on, I have rarely seen snowfall as great as here. The first few days I was very excited and even dragged Pusyseda along to build snowmen. But after a while the excitement ceases. There is too much snow and I am not good with the cold. After that, I rarely go out and my research project is also put on hold. Fortunately, Rajiva brings me many Han books like “Historical Records”, “Commentary of Zuo”, “Lushi Chunqiu”, “Warring States”, “Book of Poetry”, etc—books that I have already read long ago—as well as books thought to be lost like “Star Catalogue of Shi”.

* referring to lands immediately to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in China

Rajiva’s family reading room has many classics and texts written in numerous languages: Sanskrit, Tocharian, Brahmi, Kharoṣṭhī. The content is varied and diverse, touching on all kinds of subjects: phonology, philology, crafts, technology, calendar, medicine, logic, law, *etc.*

My mouth waters when I look at all those texts on the shelves. If only I can bring them back to the modern era, what a great source of research they would be! Most people cannot afford books from this era because each book is equivalent to a year’s worth of salary. That is not to mention the books that are written on silk. Or the court officials’ documents, sale and purchase agreements that are written on wood, because paper is many times more expensive than

wood.

From the outside, the state preceptor's residence looks very ordinary. Even the furnishings are also plain. All of the wealth is concentrated in this reading room. So every day, I always come by this room and sit for hours, studiously copying those precious texts that no amount of money can buy. The books are either brought here from India by Kumarayana or given as gifts by neighbouring countries to the Kuchan king. Since I cannot bring them with me, I can only transcribe as much as possible. The past ten days were thus not boring for me.

Every day, upon arriving home, Rajiva would go greet his father, come over to my room for his lesson, and then to the reading room to study. He will silently read as I silently transcribe. He will often return to the temple with an unfinished book, but by the next day, it would be exchanged with a new book. Occasionally he arrives home before Pusyseda's lesson is over. He would then sit and study the lesson materials in silence. By the time I begin our lesson, he would have already memorized what I am about to teach. He even gently corrects me whenever I read something wrong, making me sweat. Does he think I'm a genius? Five thousand years worth of history, what's wrong with a few mistakes? Annoyed, I would knock on his head lightly, warning him to respect his teacher.

Just as I am reminiscing my past ten days as a tutor and pulling a blanket over Pusyseda, I suddenly feel a draft of cold air behind my back. I spot Rajiva, who has opened the curtain and is standing at the doorframe watching me.

"Hey, how come you are so early today?"

His afternoon mantra starts at 4 and ends at 5, so he usually comes for our lesson around 6. But it is now only 5:30. How can I measure the time so accurately? It is because my time-travel watch can also tell the time, and the corresponding Gregorian and lunar dates, very useful. Every since the time-travel function stopped working, the watch can only be used to tell time. As such, I wear the watch every day, and anyone who sees it only thinks that it is an unusual bracelet.

I must also point out that there is a two-hour time zone difference between Xinjiang and Beijing. So when I'm travelling in Xinjiang [where she is now], I always adjust the watch to local time. Otherwise my daily schedule will be very

weird: Waking up at 10am, lunch at 2-3pm, lights still out at 9pm, and going to bed at 1am. In any case, people of this era still have no concept of time zones, so I chose to adjust the time to 21st century Xinjiang.

“I was in the palace talking with the king, and then came here directly.”

He steps into the room, looks calmly at Pusyseda’s sleeping form, and suddenly speaks in Tocharian: “Stop your pretence!”

Pusyseda immediately opens his eyes and climbs down the bed. His face red, he calls out in small voice, “Big brother...”

My eyes shoot upward. This little brat, pretending to sleep to make me carry him to bed! Still speaking with that calm demeanour, Rajiva tells Pusyseda to return to his own room. The little boy is more afraid of his older brother than his father, so he quickly springs away.

“He is still young, no need to be so stern,” my maternal instinct rises up. I have always been reluctant to be harsh on Pusyseda.

“Those songs sounded very nice,” Rajiva skilfully changes the topic.

“They are only Han children’s songs. Kuchan music must sound much nicer.”

After all, Xuanzang has praised that “It is well known that Kuchan music is famous throughout the whole region.”

“I have never heard it [Kuchan music].” A trace of sadness passes by his eyes, he hesitates before saying, “My parents have never sung me to sleep.”

I chuckle as I imagine a scene where Kumarayana and Jiva sing lullabies to their sons, which probably resemble hypnotic chanting more.

Rajiva looks at me somewhat puzzled. I hasten to say, “Then do you want to hear them [Han children’s songs]?”

He hesitates and does not answer me, looking down pensively. Then as if he has just made a big decision, he looks up and gives me a firm nod. I find it a bit strange. It’s only a song, why the hesitation?*

*[T/N: Remember this moment, it’ll pose more significance and makes more sense much later.]

I sing “My Dearest Baby” again. On a whim, I recall that scene where Song Hye

Kyo makes up this song's lyrics and funny dance moves in the drama called "Full House".* Although the dance moves had no artistic sense, they provided a good comical effect. With such thoughts, I tried my best to recreate that scene. The handsome little monk before me gives a brilliant smile in return, a carefree smile more appropriate for a thirteen-year-old boy.

*Ai Qing is probably referring to [this famous scene](#). Since the drama is my sister's favourite, I have watched it growing up. The song is called "Three little bears", and is an actual Korean children's song, though the moves were indeed made up by the actress.

Even though I have already finished singing, his laughter remains, a beautiful sound. I watch him silently, wanting to immortalize that youthful look in my memory. The past days, I have been trying hard to sketch a portrait of Rajiva to bring back to my era, to let people in the 21st century know about this great monk from 1650 years ago. But I am not an artist. I know how to sketch buildings and objects in dimensions, but portraits are somewhat beyond my skills. I kept drawing again and again but the efforts remain unsatisfactory. His otherworldly aura aside, I have not been able to capture even a third of his appearance. At the moment, I wish I have a magical brush. That smile, that picturesque smile, if I can sketch it and store for a thousand years later, how wonderful would that be!

Rajiva's face is reddening again, his eyes drifting somewhere else. I wake up from my 'dream'. I must have stared too long and made him uncomfortable.

I quickly change the topic, "So why did the king want to talk to you?"

Ch. 12

Ramblings: I read a great deal of things online (manga, books, fanfiction), and I used to resent authors/scanlators for not updating regularly, for dropping their projects. Until I became a writer myself, and now a translator. And I realize life rarely works out as planned, promises to update can't always be kept, and other commitments often take precedence over these side 'hobbies'. But writing/translating something is also a commitment, no? Certainly it starts as a personal commitment, but once we decide to post it online, it becomes more than that. It becomes an exchange, a give-and-take relationship between the writer and the audience.

For me, and for countless others who decided to translate these C-novels and those who scanlate manga, we chose to do so in order to share the joy we receive from reading these fictional works. And once we built a readership base, we then receive joy from reading your comments and thoughts. So essentially, what push us to continue forward is a desire to see this exchange continuing. Life is all about the small joys.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that translating FBFY is a commitment I made. And even though I've been remiss in fulfilling it, it doesn't mean I have given up. And seeing that I keep getting comments and followers, you guys haven't given on reading it either. So please, do continue to have faith in me, and I will strive to keep going with this project.

[If anyone cared to know about what really happened the past 2 months, it's just that I ended up working a lot over the winter break, and when I wasn't, I de-stressed by spending time with family and friends. Then school re-started and all the law stuff made me try to escape by reading a lot, but not exactly translating FBFY, since ch.12 was a lot of effort. Ended up reading tons of C-novels too. But the ironic thing is, I once affirmed that none of them can reach the status of FBFY, so finally I went back to translating and here I am.]

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square

brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 12: Why a monk

[T/N: Quick recap – in the last chapter, Rajiva went home early to meet with the king for some matter, and after that he stopped by Ai Qing’s room for the usual lesson. Ai Qing got embarrassed after singing/dancing and due to his smile, so she changed the topic by asking him why the king summoned him.]



“The king asked me to return to secular life and assist him in handling state affairs,” Rajiva answers.

“You declined, right?” Because how else would we have a great translator monk later on?

“How do you know?” Rajiva looks at me with probing eyes.

“Because you are Kumarajiva!”

Only modern [era] people would understand my words. I immediately change my tune: “Because you are not just seeking self-liberation from the cycle of life and death and self-cultivation; you also wish to aid others in reaching enlightenment, to better the lives of those around you.”

During our days on the desert, we used to spend our time discussing these philosophies. Back then, I did not know that he is Kumarajiva, so I dared not speak. But now, knowing his real identity and having read information about him, I understand what he is worrying about.

I have always felt that Buddhism is an interesting religion and that its disciples are in fact philosophers.

Before he passed away, Gautama Buddha did not leave behind any consolidated sacred text like the Bible (Christianity) or the Qu'ran (Islam). Besides, Buddhism at that time was merely a small religion amongst other major practices in India. But since Gautama Buddha's era, Buddhism has begun to branch out into numerous schools, such as the one led by Gautama Buddha's cousin, Devadatta.

Even Buddha's disciples themselves have differing opinions on the doctrines of Buddhism. Those who hold different thoughts would then write their own texts and establish their own schools. So after thousands of years, various texts from various traditions kept piling up, and to read them all would require generations. Mahayana, Hinayana, and Vajrayana are the main schools, and there are countless smaller schools.

[**T/N:** Ai Qing then listed out a long list of different schools (over 10) that I'm not going to translate because I didn't want to try, or feel it was necessary for your understanding.]

One can see that the founders of those schools are all highly intelligent philosophers. Buddhism is a religion that greatly attracts people of such calibre. Think about it, if you are someone whose intelligence far exceeds that of an ordinary person, whose basic values do not go against the broader framework, using religion, you can express your profound insights and your understanding of the spiritual world, garnering thousands of admirers and followers. It is such a great thing. For a Buddhist disciple, to be able to consolidate all their learned knowledge and their written works into a comprehensive collection, and establish their own school, it would be the greatest achievement in Buddhism.*

* If you are a bit confused over this paragraph, don't worry, because I was too. The overall meaning makes sense somewhat, but the wording is quite befuddling, even in Viet.

Rajiva is a highly intelligent and deep thinker whose reasoning resembles that of a philosopher. He too probably wishes to become a teacher and a spiritual guide for lay people to help them reach what he considers the highest attainment. Despite being only thirteen, he has already identified his own values and viewpoints.

Lost in my own thoughts, I fail to see the silence that has settled around us.

When I come about, I find Rajiva staring at me intently, his lips trembling, and his eyes seem to direct all their light into mine. Eyes that are full of appreciation, of emotions, that seem to say he has found a kindred spirit at last.

“Ai Qing, what kind of fortune does Rajiva have to meet you amidst the crowd?”

Embarrassed, I give him an awkward smile in return. It is only because I have read materials about him. I know that in the beginning, Rajiva studied under the Hinayana tradition but later on changed to the Mahayana. What I just said to him were simply general statements on the rough nature of differences between the two traditions. In addition, having seen his troubled face on this matter before, I surmise that his hesitation now must be in regards to his changing philosophy.

“Ai Qing, you remember that night in the desert, when you asked me why I decided to become a monk?”

Rajiva’s eyes leave my face and drift into a distance. I sit up properly and listen.

“I was seven when my mother went on an outing and saw a graveyard of crumbling bodies and withering bones. She realized then that greed is the root of all suffering. Humans’ desires resemble the fires in hell, fires that will reduce humans to ashes scattering across the fields. She did not want to suffer such endless torment and vowed that if she could not shave her hair and join the monastery, she will cease to eat and drink. My father was vehemently against the idea, but my mother was equally determined. On the sixth day, even when her breath is as light as the wind, my mother still refused to eat. Terrified, my father could only concede to her will. Afraid he will change his mind, my mother requested her hair to be cut before she consume anything. She underwent ordination the next day, moved out of our house and into the Tsio-li Temple.”

Having known Jiva’s reason for joining the monastic life through Rajiva’s biographies, I gently nod: “So you then followed your mother’s footsteps?”

Rajiva shakes his head. His eyes linger on the swaying candle inside the lamp for a long moment, as if recalling something.

“After my mother joined the monastery, longing to see her, I often went to visit the temple. When she and the other monks chanted mantras, I would sit

near and listen to them. For some reason, those texts, I only needed to listen once to remember every word, to everyone's amazement. When the grand master Fú Tú Shé Mí asked me the meanings of the verses that I read, I would answer fluently. He praised me as a prodigy of Buddhism and later talked with my mother, expressing his wish to take me on as a disciple."

Rajiva's great memory manifested since he was young. I remember one biography describing him at age seven as followed: "Each day memorizing a thousand verses, each verse thirty-two characters, totalling thirty two thousand characters." Think about it, a boy only seven years old who each day can learn thirty two thousand characters, not just any characters but ones from difficult Buddhist texts. That kind of genius can only be compared to that of Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawking. I think, if Rajiva ever attempts to learn pi (π) decimal digits, he would probably break the current Guinness record*.

* Back when this novel was written, probably. Not sure if he can beat the current record —70,000 digits, recited in India by Rajveer Meena in 9 hours and 27 minutes on 21 March 2015.

"My mother asked me if I would like to join the monastery. Thinking that it means I can be with her, I nodded."

His answer surprises me, but after some thought, it makes sense. No matter how clever he may have been, Rajiva was still a child, a child who did not wish to be separated from his mother. That is a simple truth. But Rajiva's life was determined by that nod when he was seven.

Rajiva's gaze moves away from the candle and returns to me, a puzzled look reappearing on his face.

"Last time, when you ask 'why a monk', I realized that I did not know how to answer. Because I want to be with my mother? I am no longer a seven-year-old. In a few more years, I will have my own ordination and become a bhikkhu. But in the past days, every night I kept asking myself, for what reason did I become a monk for?"

"Have you found an answer?" I ask, curious.

"Back when I was just learning about Buddhism, my teachers all told me that through self-discipline and practice, I can attain liberation from the cycle of life

and death, from earthly desires, and be able to reach Nirvana. When I was in Kabul, I followed the great monk Bandhudatta in learning about Hinayana. There are four million verses regarding ways of realizing the fruition of the Buddhist path. But...”

Rajiva stands up and steps toward the window, unconsciously putting one arm behind his back. That thin silhouette gives off such a solitary feeling. Even though he is young, he is already showing signs of a great master.

“On my way back to Kucha, I saw white bones filling up the desert, thieves running amok everywhere, and people experiencing so much suffering. I wondered to myself, I may reach self-liberation through the path of Buddhism, but what about those people? The thieves continue to commit all kinds of evil, while the people continue to suffer sorrows, illnesses and bitter deaths. What, then, is the use of me following the Buddhist way?”

I also stand up and come to where Rajiva is. In a soft voice, I tell him: “Hinayana withdraws, Mahayana engages.¹ That is the reason why you feel Mahayana resonates with your ideals more. Ksitigarbha² one said: ‘Until the hells are emptied, I vow to not reach Buddhahood.’ Are you the same, wishing not to cross by yourself but ferry people across?”

¹ This sentence took me a long time to translate as I struggled to find the correct words to fully encapsulate the meanings. I decided on “withdraw” and “engage”, and if anyone is confused, here is the long explanation. “Withdraw” here means to withdraw from worldly affairs/desires, to attain self-liberation. “Engage” is the opposite; it means to interact with the people, and help them reach enlightenment.

² One of the 4 central bodhisattva [someone who wishes to enable everyone to reach enlightenment] in Buddhism, often known as guardian of hell, deceased children and fetuses; popular in China and beloved in Japan.

Rajiva abruptly turns to me, his face alight, clearly touched by my words. “Yes, Ai Qing. When I was in Kashgar, I studied under the master named Suryasoma. During my stay, I first came into contact with Mahayana and was deeply impressed by its teachings. The past few days, as I discuss Buddhist philosophies with you, using your words to describe the two traditions, I yearn for more [knowledge], but...”

A trace of unhappiness crosses his face. Even his voice becomes more muted.

“But after returning to Kucha, every time I mention Mahayana beliefs, my teachers would dismiss them as heresy. This saddens Rajiva.”

I can understand that feeling. The Hinayana tradition has existed and thrived for centuries in Kucha. In the beginning, the strife between these two traditions was vast and fierce. At the time, trying to promote Mahayana, which was only a small school back then, was considered “wrongful” behaviour by a small group of monk “extremists”. That said, one can understand what kind of resistance Rajiva must have faced from others, the inner struggle he experiences in his own mind, over this matter.

“Rajiva, Mahayana in fact developed on the foundations of Hinayana. On a fundamental level, these two traditions are not in opposition to one another. Gautama Buddha founded Buddhism to challenge the Vedic religion* and the caste system, so his doctrines were quite simple. At that time, the common practice was asceticism, which emphasizes personal efforts in reaching release [from worldly matters]. But society is constantly developing and changing. The limitations of Hinayana are slowly coming out.”

* The Vedic religion was the religion of the Indo-Aryans, and existed in northern India from c. 1750 to 500 BCE. It is the predecessor to Hinduism but they are not the same.

I step near his side and give him my sincerest look.

“Hinayana emphasizes ‘self-liberation’, wishes to attain release, so they have to join the monastic life. Those who follow the Hinayana tradition do not participate in production [as in agriculture] or do not have offspring. If everyone follows this tradition, there would be no countries, and humanity itself will cease to exist. So when Buddhism conflicted with the ruling power, Mahayana was developed to resolve that conflict.”

I lift my head and continue, “Furthermore, the Mahayana tradition is about helping people cross. Just by looking up to the Buddha and reading sutras, you can become a Buddha. That way, even without joining a monastery, Buddhists can still reach Buddhahood, thereby resolving the problem of productivity. Buddhists can also marry, which satisfies the human need to reproduce. Only when the ruling power accepts it can Buddhism spread far and wide and attract followers. That is when the light of Dharma shines and saves the people.”

Rajiva seems to weigh my words in his mind, face full of contemplation. I don't know how much he understood. I only gave him my analysis of the relationship between religion and productivity, between religion and the ruling power. A moment passes. I further add, "Rajiva, your wish to convert to another tradition is right. Mahayana is more responsive to the changing of times and is able to satisfy people's spiritual needs more fully."

Given his generous personality and progressive mind, Mahayana beliefs definitely suit him more. His conversion later on is thus inevitable.

Rajiva looks up to me. A hint of worry passes by his youthful face. "What about the Central Plains? Will the Han people welcome Mahayana?"

I laugh, "Of course. The Mahayana tradition is widely circulated in the Central Plains from generation to generation."

Ji Xian Li¹ once said: "A religion's popularity and duration are often dependent on its development in China. The more the religion appeases the people, the more faith it will gain from followers and eventually the ruling power as well. Hinayana asks people to undergo arduous discipline even though becoming a Buddha is not certain. Meanwhile, the Mahayana tradition, especially the Zen Buddhism branch promotes self-awareness. 'Even Icchantika² can reach Buddhahood.' That's why, as long as one is devoted to Buddha, to learning sutras, Buddhahood is attainable. How much more relaxing that is!"

¹ The famous contemporary Chinese professor I explained about in ch.11

² An base, deluded person. Some sutras say this kind of person can never reach nirvana, others say the Buddha will not abandon any beings, even if they are from hell

Rajiva's face has lightened up. From his determined look, he must have reached a final conclusion.

"A few days ago, in an abandoned hallway in the Tsio-li Temple, I discovered by chance a sutra, a Mahayana sutra. Unable to help myself, I secretly picked it up and read the contents. Afraid my mixed feelings will negatively impact the lectures and the masters' teachings, I have not been able to tell anyone about my wish to convert. But today, after talking with Ai Qing, I now know what to do. When I return, I will read the sutra to the masters and the older students. After that, spread the Mahayana teachings, liberate and help more and more people

attain enlightenment.”

The sutra he mentioned seems familiar. “Rajiva, the sutra you found, was it the Golden Light Sutra* ? And were there malignant spirits wrapping around you, trying to make you give up [reading]?”

* Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra also, also known by the Old Uygur title Altun Yaruq. In Sanskrit, the full title is *The Sovereign King of Sutras, the Sublime Golden Light*.

Records about Kumarajiva had the following passage: “When Kumarajiva opened the Golden Light Sutra, the characters on the wooden scroll suddenly disappeared. The master knew the spirits were interfering, so his wish to read the sutra increased even more. The malignant force failed, the writing returned and the master continued to read. But there was a voice whispering to him, ‘You are a wise person, why would you read this kind of sutra?’ The master replied, ‘Evil spirit, begone! My will is as solid as the ground, nothing can shake it.’”

Of course I do not believe he actually met evil spirits. Hui Jiao wrote such a story in the biography to further emphasize that Kumarajiva encountered many mental obstacles when he decided to convert traditions. Changing one’s long-held beliefs is a difficult thing. He must have hesitated, struggled and maybe at times wanted to give up. These kinds of ‘demons’ in the mind are the hardest to conquer.

“Golden Light Sutra?” he exclaims. Then after saying out loud the sutra’s name in Sanskrit, he nods. “That is a good translation. The Buddha radiating light, shining over the people.”

He thinks for a moment. “This sutra says, to spread Buddhism is to give the blind sight, the deaf sounds, the mute a voice, to help the hunchbacks stand straight, the mad become sane, the anxious become calm, the ill get cured, the sick get healthy, the old become young again, and the poor get clothes. The Buddha’s light shines over all beings equally, treats everyone like parents, like siblings. It means that the path to reach Buddhahood is the liberation of all beings, rather than self-liberation. I agree with these profound values.”

His brows furrow, “But what do you mean demons wrapped around me?” A hint of smile passed by his eyes, he re-thinks for a second and then continues, “If there were demons, they were probably my inner turmoil. I did not know if I

should study the Mahayana tradition. Ever since I found this sutra, I kept hesitating again and again, whether I should read it. After I read it, I also hesitated. Should its teachings be widely distributed? Not until today were I able to eliminate those ‘demons’.”

“Do you remember that night, when you asked me what my aspirations are?” He takes a deep breath and leans forward. “Now, like you, I can finally say out loud what my aspirations are.” He pauses for a moment, then raises his voice, “To spread Buddhism everywhere I set foot to, to create new doctrines, to liberate the people, that is my aspiration.”

Rajiva holds his head high, and even the oil lamp’s dim light cannot not hide the self-confidence on his face. My eyes could not stop staring. Self-assurance and intelligence glow on this precocious teenager, and just by looking at him, I feel as if I can see the bright future ahead, a sky set ablaze with the vibrant forces of life, radiating everywhere.

“Very ambitious!” I clap my hands and praise him loudly. “I admire people who have aspirations, ambitions. Keep going forward towards your goal, you will certainly be successful.”

Rajiva suddenly turns to my side and gives me a respectful bow, surprising me. When he looks up, his cheeks were flushed, his eyes sincere and full of enthusiasm. “Ai Qing, Buddha’s mercy has allowed me to have someone great like you as my teacher to guide me on my path. I vow to never let you down.”

He has never shown me such great respect. A spark suddenly ignites in my heart inexplicably, and in a flash, spreads out my entire body. Without thinking, I use my hand as a fan. Why is it that despite being in winter, the air suddenly feels too hot?

That evening, after finishing with the lesson, as he takes a step out the door, Rajiva glances up at the sky full of stars. “Tomorrow’s weather will be fine,” he says.

Then he turns to me with a smile full of spring, “Ai Qing, tomorrow I will give you a tour* around Kucha.”

*Tour? What tour? It’s a date.

T/N: It did take me long, but I'm amazed I finally finished translating this chapter. All that philosophy... Even when I took classes on religions and philosophy, I didn't even have to put in this much effort.

Anyhow, Xiao Chun probably knew this chapter was dry, even if it was an important milestone in Rajiva's life, so she made it up by having them on a date next chapter. I don't care what anyone else says, it's a date.

So look forward to next chapter! I've been itching to translate ch.13 for a while so hopefully I'll be able to translate much faster and be able to update next week.

Also, we are inching very close to the end of Book I. Although I love the the entire novel as a whole, the excitement really begins with Book II, when Rajiva reaches adulthood. I'm looking forward to translating Book II already.

Ch. 13

Ramblings: Wow, look at this. Look at what excitement over a chapter can do to my translation speed. Even though I've read this novel dozens of times. This chapter is roughly the same length as last chapter, albeit less heavy in content. It took me almost 2 months for last chapter and only 2 days for this one lol.

Anyway, I'm sure you all are quite impatient to read so carry on! Hope you like it!

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 13: A day touring Kucha

In "Great Tang Records on the Western Regions", Xuanzang said the following about Kucha: "Kucha Kingdom spans a thousand li* from east to west, over six hundred li from north to south, and the perimeter of the citadel is about seventeen, eighteen li."

* I simply used "mile" before, but this is more accurate. "Li" is Chinese mile, a traditional unit of distance, roughly equals 323m during Tang Dynasty (value of li changed from period to period).

Right now, I am standing on a section of that citadel overlooking the city below. In my vision I see numerous mountains that make up the Tian Shan, all covered by snow. At the foot of the range is the irrigation system and a series of neatly-formed fields, also covered by snow, although there are also spots uncovered, revealing darkish soil underneath the sunlight.



Tian Shan

“To have such great snowfall, the Kuchan people are really blessed,” Rajiva says as he looks at the Tian Shan far ahead, his breath forming a white mist that dissolves into the air around him.

At my puzzled look, he smiles and explains, “Kucha is arid and has little rain year-round. Only when the winter is cold and there is great snowfall, will there be enough water for the crops next year.”

Ah, that’s right, this place only rains a few times a year, so most of the irrigation is dependent on Tian Shan’s snow. The snow would melt into small rivers, and as long as those rivers exist, they will be able to farm. Places that have no water will turn into deserts. The sizes of countries in Central Asia were small due to this geographical factor.

I suddenly remember that every year in Kucha, there is a grand festival called Su Mu Zhe, also known as the praying for cold festival*. On this day, various activities are held to pray for a cold season and heavy snow. During the Tang Dynasty, this festival was brought over to the Central Plains and became one of the dynasty’s major festivals.

* Sorry, I had to opt for transliteration since I couldn’t find the festival’s name.

“When does the praying for cold festival start?” I am excited at the thought of being able to witness this event.

“At the beginning of the 7th month* each year.”

* Why I did not use July is because the Gregorian calendar was not yet in use, dates and festivals were still based on the lunar calendar

“Great! I’ll definitely go!” I bring my cold hands to my mouth for some warm breath and glance up at him. “You are coming with me, right?”

He freezes for a moment and turns away to look at the Tian Shan, not speaking for a while. Strange, it's just attending a festival, why is he taking so long to decide? If he doesn't want to, I'll ask Pusyseda to go with me instead.

"Ai Qing, one of the Ten Precepts says monks are to avoid music, singing and dancing. I cannot go [with you]," Eyes still looking at the Tian Shan, he speaks in a restrained voice with hints of discontent.

I am stunned. No wonder it took him so much determination to hear me sing yesterday. [T/N: refer to ch.11]. Thinking about how I had unintentionally made him break his vows, a feeling of guilt arises in my heart.

"I'm sorry. I'm not familiar with all the Buddhist precepts. Tell me what the Ten Precepts are so that I'll be more careful from now on."

Rajiva is silent for a moment, looking down at his feet, and finally whispers, "The first five precepts are: No killing, no stealing, no lying, no drinking [alcohol], and no sexual activity."

These precepts sound familiar. Puzzled, I ask him, "Aren't these the five lay* precepts?"

* lay people as in those who are not monastic but still practice Buddhism

"There is one difference between the five lay precepts and the precepts for monks." Rajiva's face suddenly turns red. Perhaps due to the cold wind? He quickly strides over to a low section of the fortress. I hasten after him.

"The 5th precept for the lay is 'no sexual misconduct', and for monks is 'no sexual activity'." He doesn't look at me, his eyes glued to the wall.

Now I understand. It means that lay people can marry and consummate their relationship, while monks are not allowed to engage in any sexual relationship. Looking at his crimson face, he is probably embarrassed at having to discuss this precept. I clear my throat and ask him what the next five precepts are.

We step down from the citadel and continue walking. Rajiva explains to me the remaining precepts.

6. Abstain from using high and luxurious beds and seats.
7. Abstain from using floral fragrances – meaning to not apply your body with

any scented products. Oh this is an Indian habit.

8. Abstain from singing and dancing – meaning not watching any musical performances. This, he just explained to me earlier.
9. Abstain from silver and gold – this is easy to understand, meaning they cannot have jewellery.
10. Abstain from consuming food at improper times – meaning to not eat after the sun has set. This I already knew and observed.

We keep talking as we walk and before long, we have arrived at the main square west of the citadel. On both sides of the road are huge Buddha statues, around 4-5m in height, giving the air a solemn feel. If only we could preserve these statues to the modern days, what a treasure they would be.

Rajiva tells me that this is where the General Assembly is hosted every five years. This Assembly is a Buddhist custom, a gathering of the various countries that follow Buddhism. Besides the monks, the lay people can also attend. During the Assembly, there are a variety of activities such as lectures, debates, alms, fasting, *etc.* All expenses are covered by the king.

I understand. In the Central Plains, there is a similar assembly called “Wu Zhe Da Hui” [Open Assembly]. “Open” here means no covering, no hiding, no matter if one is a monk or a lay person, all are treated equally.

Rajiva quietly waits while I measure and sketch the square. I sketch it plainly and with simple elevation, since I’m not good at drawing and do not want to make Rajiva wait for too long. Besides, I’ll be returning here often, plenty of time to make a more detailed sketch then. Rajiva guides me to northwest of the square, where there is a small river, albeit frozen. On the other side of the river is a magnificent temple. I want to go visit it. There is a bridge on the far side but to save time, we decide to walk across the river.

Even though ice has formed a thick sheet on top, I grew up on the south of the Yangtze River and do not possess any skating skills that any northern children would know. I tremble, too scared to put my feet on the ice. A thin hand with long slender fingers extends in front of me. Without thinking, I grab it and hold tight. That warm and slightly moist hand carefully guides me along. I gaze intently at the ice under my feet the whole time, afraid that I will fall down some

hole.

Finally we make it across. I let out a sigh of relief and about to look up to thank Rajiva, but I'm horrified to discover my vision is suddenly coloured with dark spots. Even Rajiva's face is becoming obscured.

I cry out, "Rajiva, why can't I see you?"

I feel a hand covering my eyes and the other hand on my shoulder, leaning me against a thin frame and gently guiding me to a place to sit down.

"Don't be scared. Keep your eyes closed, they'll be fine in a moment."

I can feel his breath on my ear, a tingling feeling. Since young, I've always disliked people blowing into my ears, so out of pure instinct, I immediately move my head away. Unfortunately, I end up hitting his chin. We both grunt in pain.

"Does it hurt?" We ask each other at the same time. I am momentarily surprised but choose not to dwell on it. I bring up my hand and rub my sore head, mouth whimpering in pain. If am in this much pain, Rajiva must also feel the same, but he does not say anything. I do not know what to think.

After a while, he speaks up, "My fault, I should have told you to not look at the snow for so long."

His breath is tickling my ear again but this time, I don't dare to avoid it. I clear my throat in an attempt to chase away the redness creeping up my face.

"Rajiva, I won't become blind, right?"

"No, you won't."

Despite his words, why is his voice trembling? Panic seizes me. I grab his sleeves and hastily ask, "What do I do if I become blind?!"

One of his Rajiva's hands is still covering my eyes, the other still on my shoulder. It is a gentle touch, and yet I can still feel those too-thin hands through my coat. He tells me again, "No, you won't," but his voice is no longer trembling. I am confused. What is up with him?

We sit there for a while, then Rajiva takes away his hands and tells me to open my eyes. That pure youthful face slowly becomes clear before my eyes. His eyes as clear as bottomless lake are watching me with concern, his face flushing red.

We are so close, I can see my reflection in those clear eyes. For a moment, my heart skips a beat or two.

I stand up abruptly. "I'm good now, let's go."

He seems to suddenly wake up and immediately moves away. His face continues to redden, the colour almost overtaking his honeycomb skin. Even his neck buried in the collar is red. Come to think of it, that was first time we have been so intimate towards each other. Not only Rajiva, even I do not know where to hide my face.

I continue to walk, pretending a calm I do not feel. He is surprised but quickly follows after me. The flush on his face has yet to fade. I clear my throat and ask in a solemn voice, "What is the name of this temple?"

Rajiva looks up, takes a steady breath and calmly replies, "It's the Ascharya Monastery. Do you remember, I taught you before that 'Ascharya' means 'strange'."

"Why is it called 'strange'?"

"Long ago, there was a devout Buddhist king who wanted to travel to distant lands to pay tribute to the Buddha, so he decided to leave the state affairs to his half-brother. Before the king embarked on his journey, his brother gave him a golden casket and told him not to open it until he returns. The day the king returned, he heard from others that in his absence, his brother has been debauching himself in the inner palace [where the women resided]. Furious, the king threw his brother into jail to await punishment. The brother reminded the king to open the golden casket from before. The king opened it but did not understand, so he asked his brother what it was," Rajiva suddenly stops, making me anxious.

"What was it?" I ask him.

He makes a motion as if to speak, and then falters, a flush returning to his face.

Ah, I remember now. There was a story about this in the "Great Tang Records on the Western Regions".

"It's the brother's reproductive organ, right?" I rub my hands together to ward off the cold. How exciting, to think that I would be able to visit this "strange"

monastery two hundred years before* Xuanzang!

* Xuanzang's Records were written in the 7th century CE; Kumarajiva lived in the 4-5th century.

"This brother is very admirable. He already knew beforehand that there will be people scheming against him, and he would have nothing to prove his innocence, so he mutilated himself in order to preserve his life later on." I cannot help but laugh, "But what a high price that was!"

Rajiva gives me a puzzled look. He probably did not think I would be able to discuss such a sensitive topic so easily. Thinking through, I stop laughing, a bit embarrassed [now]. "So what happened next?"

"The brother told the king: Afraid that there will be false reports against him later on, the brother was forced to make such a decision [to mutilate himself]. The king was shocked, but was soon moved by his brother's actions. He then let his brother out of jail and allowed him to move in and out the palace freely.

One day, while travelling, the brother encountered a cowherd who was about to geld five hundred oxen. Seeing this, and reflecting that they were about to suffer just as he did, out of compassion, he decided to use his money to buy back the oxen. He felt it was karma. Soon after, the brother's body returned to normal. Not wanting to be subject to further scheming, he decided to stop entering the inner palace [where the women resided]. Puzzled, the king asked him the reason and was told the story. Afterwards, the king decreed to build this monastery and called it Ascharya, in honour of the brother's conduct. It has been over three hundred years since."

I cannot help but burst out laughing again. "Unbelievable! That 'thing' could re-grow just like that? Maybe he didn't actually do it, or maybe didn't finish the job?"

Rajiva scowls, his cheeks still flushing red, and tells me in a firm voice, "The king's brother bought all those oxen, performing a good deed, so the Buddha in his compassion returned the brother to normal, how could you say it was all a lie? Thanks to this strange tale, numerous monks from far away flocked to this monastery, giving birth to many grand masters. The king and officials were also in great support, so for the past three hundred years, the incense has never

stopped burning in this place. If the Buddha was not moved by the brother's action, if not for his benevolent power, how else could one explain such a tale?"

I gently slap my mouth in self-punishment. My carelessness has hurt his religious devotion. The tale is indeed hard to explain and since the parties involved are no longer alive, and there is no other way to verify it, they can only believe the tale to be true.

We resume our walk and eventually arrive at the monastery's entrance. We are received by a monk, who then goes to inform the head master of our arrival. Before we even reach the main hall, the head master is already making his way towards us, followed by some senior monks. The old head master seems very respectful towards Rajiva.

Rajiva introduces me as his Han teacher and explains that since I'll be leaving Kucha in the coming spring, he is showing me around the city. After hearing it, the head master kindly welcomes me and gives me a personal tour around the monastery. Ascharya Monastery is much bigger than the Tsio-li Temple [where Rajiva and his mom stay]. And thanks to that strange tale, the monastery receives a great number of visitors each day. The main hall's ceiling is high and spacious. The Buddha statues are highly detailed works, and the murals on the walls are vibrant with colours and complex strokes. I keep praising them as I go around. I feel this strong urge to re-draw all those paintings to bring back to my time.

After one round, I shyly ask to stop to take care of my personal 'business'. The head master tells a little monk to show me the way. Not wanting to make him wait for me at the door, I tell the little monk to go ahead, and I'll find the way back by myself.

I step out of the washroom and am about to return to the main hall, when I hear two monks talking at a corner and mentioning Kumarajiva. Curious, I slow down my steps to eavesdrop. They converse in Tocharian but I can understand most of it.

[**T/N:** The italicized is the monks' conversation]

"That Kumarajiva dared to bring a woman into a place of Buddha. Not only that, she is a Han woman. His Han teacher, he said. How unbelievable, that he

asked a woman to become his teacher. Who knows what their relationship is really like?"

"His background is different from us, so he can easily ignore the precepts. Who will punish him for it?"

"He is well-clothed and well-fed, even has servants, unlike us who do not have a State Preceptor for a father and a princess for a mother. But he is ignoring the precepts too blatantly. Every day coming in and out the monastery without asking the head master, attending the morning and afternoon mantras whenever he feels like it. That kind of discipline, how can it bear fruition?"

"I heard that in addition to the true Buddhist way, he is secretly reading materials on Mahayana. He even debated with the masters about those heretic materials, how disrespectful."

"That's right, this kind of person..."

I don't want to listen any further and silently return to the main hall.

Stories about Rajiva describe him as a person who is "straightforward and open-minded, unlike his fellow practitioners". For a Buddhist follower, extraordinary intelligence is a double-edged sword. Rajiva's royal background fosters his natural talents but also gives him a disadvantage. I can understand why those monks were criticizing him, but listening to them talk about Rajiva in such a manner made me very uncomfortable. I suddenly feel a bit angry.

After we exit the 'strange' monastery, Rajiva offers to show me other places. I look at my [time-travel] watch. Only an hour left before his afternoon mantra. Sighing, I urge him to quickly return to Tsio-li Temple. I don't consider those precepts to be that important, but I know that his actions and words are always under watchful eyes. He cannot leave behind his Buddhist identity.

He appears surprised but after seeing that the sky is darkening, tells me that he will take me back to his father's residence. I decline, telling him that I know the way so I can go by myself. I do not want hear others talking bad about him due to our relationship.

His face turns a little pale. He stares at me, "Ai Qing, you must have heard something."

I shake my head.

“Whatever it is that you heard, pay no heed to it.”

He tells me not to take heed, but his tone is slightly angry. Swinging one sleeve behind his back, he holds his head high and says, “Rajiva acts not according to old-fashioned customs but to my conscience.”

I sigh. His background and intelligence have made him famous since a young age, but also created ‘conditions’ for him to sometimes ignore certain Buddhist precepts, to be a bit stubborn. But Rajiva, do you not know where that attitude of yours come from? *

* This last sentence was a bit confusing to translate, even after I verified it against the Chinese ebook. Not sure if that was Xiao Chun’s intended meaning.

That day, I stubbornly insist on going back by myself. I am merely a passerby in his life journey. I don’t want the rumours about him to add one more thing that is me.

When I return to the State Preceptor’s residence, a small form wrapped in blankets dives into my arms, chiding me and asking me where I was the whole day. I happily take his hand and play hide-and-seek with him. Laughter soon rings clear across the garden, chasing away all my worries. I play for a while, and then all of a sudden, I see brown kasaya robes appearing at the door. He is skipping his afternoon mantras again!

Ramblings: I bet you all didn’t like how the ‘date’ turned a bit sour at the end. Those ignorant monks! But what can we do, not only is our male lead a serious character, so is our female lead. In some ways, she is even more serious than him about following the precepts. This will come up as an issue again in Book II.

This chapter is actually very meaningful. It serves two important purposes. One, it teases us with a bit of romantic inclination between our main characters, which will help transitioning us into Book II. Secondly, the chapter also tells us the obstacles that their relationship will face in the future: the precepts, his devotion to Buddhism, and the public eye (mainly from the monastic community). This creates a nice tension for the novel’s plot to unfold on. But worry not, this novel is still a romance first and foremost.

Anyway, there is only one more chapter left in Book I. *drum roll* and then Book II is coming! Who is as excited as I am?

Ch. 14

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 14: I return



The coming days pass by quickly. In a blink, it is already spring. Even though the Kuchan people do not celebrate the Chinese New Year like the



Han, I still give the two brothers gifts on New Year's Day. Rajiva gets a string of prayer beads made of sandalwood, while Pusyseda gets a Doraemon picture I drew by hand. I tell them I am now a year older, 24 years old to be precise. Truthfully, I don't want to admit the fact that I'm getting older. My birthday is very easy to remember, the 10th day of the 1st lunar month, so I've always celebrated it using the lunar calendar. But after I turned 20, I stop liking Chinese New Year, since every New Year's Day reminds me that I'm getting older and older.

T/N: It's fitting that Lunar New Year is mentioned here since it's coming up soon in our time, Feb 8 to be exact.

In this era I only have the two brothers to celebrate my birthday with me. I teach them how to say "happy birthday" and sing the birthday song in Han, then

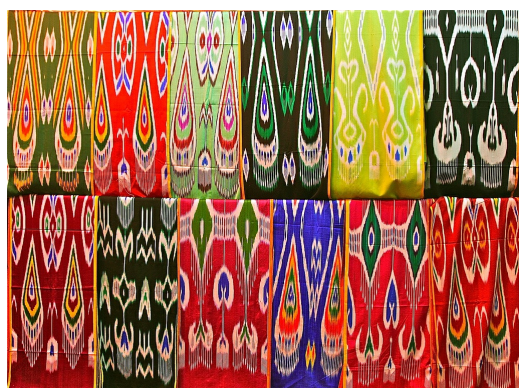
ask them to sing with me. Pusyseda sings like a baby learning how to talk, very funny but also very cute. Rajiva shakes his head at me, refusing to sing. But then I tell him that on birthdays, Han people will say “happy birthday”, sing the song, eat a yummy and creamy cake and give gifts. After hearing it, Rajiva still hesitates for a long while, but at last opens his mouth to sing.

His singing voice is as gentle and moving as his speaking voice, albeit a bit hoarse at certain points due to voice change [puberty], but this just gives the song a unique sound. His softly sung birthday song is the best one I’ve ever heard on my birthdays. However, his face, just as I predicted, is as red as a tomato, overtaking his honeycomb skin.

T/N: Tsk, tsk, you’re making him break his vows again Ai Qing, using your birthday as an excuse.

The next evening, after our lesson finishes, Rajiva doesn’t go to the reading room as usual. He keeps dragging his feet for a while before pulling out a silk scarf with diamond shapes coloured red, yellow and blue weaving together.

“For you,” he is blushing again, “You said you get gifts on your birthday...”



I have no time to reflect on his kindness, too busy looking at my gift. This scarf is made of Atlas silk—“Atlas” means “tie-dyed” silk, also the most commonly used silk to make clothes for women in Xinjiang today. Silk from Khotan* is the most famous of all. Silk, jade and carpets were called the three “national treasures” of Khotan. Even well into the 21st century, the Hotan* people still use the traditional silk factories and wooden looms over 5m high.

* Khotan (or Yutian in Chinese) was an ancient Buddhist kingdom that was located on the Silk Road south of the Taklamakan Desert (modern Xinjiang, China). Kucha was located north of the desert. The ancient Khotan capital was originally located to the west of modern-day Hotan (a town).

“Rajiva, do you know the Masa Temple in Khotan? Those mulberry seeds that the Han princess brought to the Western Regions were planted there.”

In the “Great Tang Records on the Western Regions”, Xuanzang described how silk production came to Khotan.

“I know. The Western Regions originally knew nothing about mulberry trees or silkworms. When the Khotan king came to ask the Han princess’ hand in marriage, he secretly told the princess that Khotan had no silk, so she won’t be able to wear beautiful dresses. The princess then hid the mulberry seeds and silkworms in her headdress. Khotan’s wealth later on was credited to the manufacturing of silk.”

Silk was originally a product monopolized by the Chinese, and the manufacturing techniques were a tightly kept secret. But thanks to the princess, the techniques were passed on to the Western Regions, from there to West Asia and then to Europe, at which point China ceased to have monopoly on silk. Khotan’s silk products became famous starting around the 4th century CE. During ancient times, Khotan was known as the “capital of silk”. Today, this invaluable silk scarf of the 4th century is lying before my eyes, confirming the authenticity of the legend about how sericulture spread along the Silk Road.

“Why do only ask about that legend? Do you not like the gift?” Rajiva looks at me anxiously, hands holding the scarf awkwardly, not knowing where to put it. “Khotan silk of course can’t be compared to silk of the Han, if you don’t like it, I will-”

“No such thing!” I yell out. Standing up, I quickly grab a hold of him and snatch the scarf away. “Don’t you dare take it back!”

Rajiva sighs in relief. I’m too used to his flushing face now so I’m no longer surprised by its appearance. He gives me a brilliant smile as if it was he who received a gift instead.

“But...” Rajiva looks at me with quizzical eyes, “Ai Qing, how did you know about the Masa Temple in Khotan?”

Not again! I just can’t seem to control my blabbering mouth.

I glare at him and pull at my hair. With his logical thinking, no matter what kind of lies I tell, he’ll be able to figure them out. It’s better to not lie to begin with.

“Stop asking me. I just know it, alright?”

Rajiva doesn't ask any further and just smiles. But when he leaves he is still eyeing me thoughtfully, making me all anxious inside.

Not long after, the first day of spring arrives. Spring also means the re-opening of the Silk Road. I can now prepare to go to Chang'an. Kumarayana [Rajiva's father] helps me contact a reliable group of merchants and even gives me numerous gifts. I am naturally grateful. But I'm not as happy facing the two brothers.

Rajiva always wears a calm expression so it's not as bad, although once or twice I would catch a strange look in his eyes, like on the day he gave me the silk scarf. That look makes my heart go pitter-patter but I pretend not to see it. Acting dumb is my specialty after all. Who asked him to be Kumarajiva? I am not so daring that I'd mess with someone so untouchable. I can only leave quietly. Pusyseda, on the other hand, I can't deal with. Just a little provoked and he will cry a river and beg me to not leave. The little guy makes me feel like I'm saying goodbye forever [as in death] so I can only keep reassuring him that I will return.

There are six, seven days left until I begin my journey so I want to take a bath. What's so worth mentioning about me taking a bath? Truthfully, not much, but it's because this time a major incident occurs. Don't misunderstand, it's not like that vulgar scene you often see in romance novels where the male lead breaks in while the protagonist is bathing. That kind of 'interesting' thing would never happen to me. Actually, the incident occurs when I finish bathing and return to my room.

I am wringing my wet hair in the room when I see Pusyseda messing with my time travel watch, which I took off before I went bathing and left on the table. Seeing me, the little guy happily shakes the watch back and forth.

"Ai Qing, this toy is very fun. It jumps and makes this tick tick sound. Give it to me please?"

My heart skips a beat. At that time, the sky is very bright and lots of sunlight is streaming in the room. I jump over and grab the watch. It's working again! The signal light that I tried so hard to turn on but failed before [chapter 1] is now counting backwards. Oh god, what did Pusyseda press to make this damn watch working again? The countdown is for 3 minutes, now only has 2.5 minutes. I try

to press the stop button but this stupid thing, when I want it to work it doesn't, when I want it to stop it also doesn't. This, this is too sudden. I just went bathing to find this happening when I return. Should I go or not?

"Ai Qing, what's wrong?"

I jerk my head up and see a pair of innocent eyes blinking at me. In minutes the watch will emit radiation rays, I cannot let him get affected. I hurriedly grab the kid and push him outside. I used too much force and ended up hurting him, making him scared. As soon as he is outside, I hear him wailing. I bolt the door with the speed of a track runner, rush off to find my Northface backpack in the cupboard, and pull out my anti-radiation jacket. Moving quickly, I take off my clothes while turning towards the door and shout, "Pusyseda, listen up. I am a fairy and I now have to return to the sky. Soon there will be a great light coming out, you must close your eyes tight and not look at it, else you will turn blind. You got it?"

It's actually not that serious, but it'll be dangerous if the kid happens to look at the radiation directly.

Terrified, the little guy cries even louder.

"Don't be scared. I won't disappear, I'm just returning to my own world. I will look after you in the sky." I console him since I don't want to leave him behind with traumatic memories.

I hurriedly put on the anti-radiation jacket and it's so cold that it gives me goosebumps. No matter, time is almost up. I am fumbling with the zipper when I hear Pusyseda speaking in a choked voice, "Please don't go! Pusyseda promises to not be naughty anymore, to listen to you well and study hard. Don't go please."

I sigh. This watch will only work once. If I don't go, I'll be stuck here forever. I am not like the other time-travelling heroines in novels who want to stay in ancient times out of love. My purpose has always been clear. I came here to research, so if I don't return, there will be no point.

"Tell Rajiva for me, he will become a great figure in the future and remind him not to forget his mission to travel to the Central Plains and promote Buddhism!"

“Wil you return?”

I don't know, really don't know. Perhaps this is where our fate ends. I don't know if I'll be continuing with the project after my return. Even if I'm able, I don't know if I will be able to go back to Kucha. Even if I get to Kucha, I don't know if they will still be alive...

I put on my safety helmet and my watch. There are 3 seconds left. I take a deep breath just in time to shout, “If you study well and memorize the Book of Poetry, I will return-“

Dazzling light burst out and I feel that familiar sensation of flying on clouds again, where my internal organs seem to turn upside down. One second before I'm about to lose consciousness, I suddenly remember that my sketchpad full of pages I painstakingly drew; my notepad full of research totalling thousands of characters; precious Tocharian books that I collected; the artefacts I bought from the market and secretly hid under the bed; the gifts I got from Jiva, Kumarayana and countless others; and my Atlas silk scarf, are all left behind! God, this time-travel trip has all come to waste!

Ramblings:

That, my friends, is the end of Book I (or Part I, not to be confused with Volume 1). It's the first goodbye so Xiao Chun chose to do it on a rather abrupt and humorous note. She saved all the angst for later, that evil woman. We've all known from the novel's summary that Ai Qing will be returning (how else are we gonna have 100 chapters to cover), so it's not much of a spoiler at this stage.

Book II will begin with chapter 15, which I will combine with chapter 16 for you readers' sake. I'm hoping to finish them in short order but I have a couple school assignments coming up so timing might be a bit off. But fear not, I won't do that disappearing act for 1-2 months again! Until then, my friends.

P.S. Oh I almost forgot, since I probably won't see you guys until after, Happy Lunar New Year for those who celebrate it! Hope you all will have a fantastic year ahead with all your loved ones, and may you succeed in all your endeavours.

Ch. 15-16

Ramblings: To make up for the wait, here are two chapters Lol, I actually had always intended to translate these two chapter together to shorten the wait before their meeting, and also because ch.16 is quite short. So enjoy everyone!

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 15: I cross again

Casting my hands around, I feel something soft and fine. My eyes open, then quickly close after getting assaulted by the sunlight. My landing this time is on a desert once again. I seem to have an affinity with deserts, though I do not know if it is the same era and place. I stand up, inspect all the equipment inside my bag, and then check my upgraded time-travel watch. Fortunately, the signal light is green, meaning everything is okay, and that the scientists' efforts over the past 5 months have not gone to waste. Having learned their lessons last time, the scientists stopped using the unstable solar energy to power the device, and instead switched to using sophisticated Lithium batteries. I heard that the batteries were BYD's newest product, much better than Sony's.

Of course, my successful time-travel last time has caused a huge uproar, on the same par as Yang Li Wei's first travel into space. I disappeared for more than five months. The research team was unable to confirm whether I was successful or dead. During that time, my boss was worried sick, having no clue how to explain to my parents [what was going on]. Until one afternoon, when I fell out of the sky and onto the willow tree outside the experiment room, breaking many of its green branches.

During the past 5 months in the 21st century, I was very busy. I had to go

through a physical examination, submit reports, and also embark on a trip to Xinjiang with my boss for a month. The ruins of the Kuchan capital are located at the center of the old and new Kuqa City, which the locals called the Ancient City Pilang. I followed the archeologists around to study and examine the ruins of the capital, the citadel, the “strange” temple, and the main square. Then I helped the linguists decipher the Tocharian language in the museum.



Ancient City Pilang

Finally I wandered around on my own amongst the ruins. Looking at the rows of houses, the farmlands in the surrounding areas, I could see the foundation that was laid over a thousand years ago, but not a trace is left of any other features. I was overcome with a feeling that couldn't be described. For me, everything was whole and animated a few months ago, yet now it was merely a site of ruins 1650 years old. Those people full of vigor from a few months ago, in a flash had become a few words on paper. Standing on the hills where a magnificent citadel once stood, my ears rang as if a gentle voice was still speaking to them.

“Ai Qing, tomorrow I will give you a tour around Kucha.”

“To have such great snowfall, the Kuchan people are really blessed.”

“Don't be scared. Keep your eyes closed, they'll be fine in a moment.”

Every time that happened, I would frantically look at all directions, and only when I realized that the brown kasaya robe I saw was merely an illusion, did I come around. Rajiva, are we perhaps in the same space, only 1650 years apart? Are you doing well? I smiled sadly, what a foolish question that was. His destiny, how could I not know?

When we went to study the Kizil Caves, I stood in a daze for a long while before

the statue of Kumarajiva laid in front of the caves. The statue depicted Kumarajiva around 30 to 40 years of age. One leg is folded and his right hand is placed on the knee of that leg. Wearing the kasaya robe that exposes one shoulder on his tall and thin body, together with that high forehead and long brows, the statue gives off an image of great intelligence, a big heart and an otherworldly aura. Although not as animated as the real person, I felt the sculptor had at least captured his aura accurately. I had not seen Rajiva's appearance as an adult, but looking at the statue, I fell into a trance. I took a photo of me standing in the statue's shadow. At night while writing my reports, every time I got tired I would pull out the photo to look at. I wished I could see Rajiva again, the Rajiva in adulthood.

[T/N: next paragraph omitted, it's just about a mummy in the museum that has flattened forehead like that of Jiva's and other Kuchan royalty].

The original plan was that after my research trip at Kuqa, I would have a meeting with Buddhism experts on Kumarajiva. Even though I only knew Rajiva for a short time, it was still first-hand experience—any information that could be gleamed was invaluable. But all of a sudden, my boss received a phone call from the research team [at the university], so the two of us hurried back to the experiment room to prepare for the second crossing, ah no, the fourth time to be exact.

This time, all the equipment was upgraded. I no longer had that uncomfortable feeling when flying in space like last time. However, they could not control where and when I would land, only estimated it to be around two thousand years ago. The room for error was about 500 years, give or take, meaning I could be anywhere between the last years of the Warring States and the Northern Southern Dynasties. From last time's experience, I decided to wear the loose Han outfit once again. This outfit was quite common and was also in use for the longest time in history.

I look at the scenery before me. The similarities between the two times I time-travelled give me a strong feeling that I have indeed returned to *that* place! As such, my heart no longer panics. I try to figure out how to escape this desert and find a place with people. After looking around, I realize that I have landed at the edge of the desert, near a small forest of poplar and red willow trees. The poplar

trees far ahead seem quite dense and green. I decide to head in that direction.

Right now is the end of May, so noon on the desert is extremely oppressive. I need to find water. The poplar forest seems so dense, so the water source must not be far. When a big lake appears in front of my eyes, I get so excited that I fly to it.

It is hard to imagine that in this vast desert, such a big lake would exist. More importantly, there are people near the lake. Happy that I am able find my own kind amongst this wilderness, I hurry over. But when I almost reach their side, I reel to a sudden halt. My first instinct is to turn around and run in the opposite direction. But I have not yet run a few steps before an arrow thuds into the spot next to my foot. Terrified, I stop and put my hands up:

“Don’t shoot! I surrender!”

I then get taken to the group of people I saw earlier, around twenty in total. Looking at the way they dress and carry themselves, faces all crooked and scary, it is obvious that they are bandits. There are around ten more people who are kneeling on the ground, their hands and feet tied, trembling in fear and glancing at me in sympathy. They look like Persians. Next to them are a number of horses and camels, grazing without a care. I guess that they must be a group of merchants that got robbed on the way.

Well, I did land near the Silk Road, where robbery often happened on a regular basis. This is the first time I have gotten involved in this kind of occurrence; will I have to resort to weapons? There is a small stun gun in the pocket of my anti-radiation jacket. My boss warned that only in emergencies, am I allowed to use it, because it is a modern invention and its presence will alter history. My boss always tells me to not do anything that will alter history, but did he not think that my time-travelling itself is one such action?

The bandits are discussing with each other in Tocharian that I can understand, though there is a dialect, not the Kuchan accent I knew.

I wrack my brains trying to figure out how to escape. I am not as resourceful as Xuanzang, who was able to use words to disarm the bandits he met on his way to India, making them surrender and follow the Buddhist way. So after some observation on the situation between the two sides, I decide: to defeat enemies,

one must first capture the leader.

I quietly put one hand into my pocket and touch the gun. Fortunate for me, the bandits see me as a weak girl so did not bother tying me up like the Persians. I smile sweetly at the bearded man on the carpet, who is eating his grilled meat in a carefree manner. I inch closer to him and coyly speak in Tocharian: “Great Lord...”

I bite down my lips in an attempt to shake off the tremble that is taking over me.

The brute smiles and extends his greasy hand towards me. I take another step forward and make it seems I am about to fall into his lap, but at the last second, I suddenly pull out my gun and shoot him. This stun gun is quite impressive. The brute has not time to react before falling down in a heap. Using the moment of confusion, I take out five more bandits nearest to me. Using my most authoritative voice, I tell the rest of them: “Lay down your weapons and I will not kill you!”

To scare them further, I shout: “This is a poison that acts very fast, if you are not afraid, come here and try!”

Perhaps my weapon from the 21st century gave them quite a scare. The remaining dozen bandits can only look at their unmoving brothers on the ground. Of course I was only bluffing. My stun gun is very small, can only shoot an opponent within five metres distance. So when the thieves lay down all their sabres, bows and swords, I let out a quiet breath [of relief]; my clothes are soaked with sweat at the back. I hurry over to where the Persians are to undo their bindings. But the knots are too tight so I end up pulling out my Swiss Army Knife to finish the task.

[T/N: Ai Qing is quite a badass, eh? Courage is not fearlessness, but the ability to take action even in fear.]

I do not have to worry about the rest. The remaining bandits are scared of the weapon I have in my hand, and faced with a group of armed Persians chasing them, they quickly run away. The Persians use their most solemn ceremony to thank me. In their group, there are a couple of people who can speak Han, and one person who knows Tocharian. Even though they are not fluent, but with

both languages filling in each other's gaps and the use of body language, we can understand each other for the most part.

I pull out a map collection from my backpack and ask them to locate where we are. This map collection is very special. It was drawn according to known geography 500 years before and after the Han dynasty. I turn to the page on the Western Regions. Because it is written in Han, it takes a long while before they can point out a location relative to where we are, which is near Luntai (Bügür). I examine the map carefully and realize I have landed near the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. To have a field of grass in the extremely arid Taklamakan Desert, it must be the famous Lop Nor Lake* ! This place was inhabited by the ancient Lop Nor people who survived by fishing in this lake. But I do not see any houses around here. Perhaps they reside at another edge of the lake. Whether those bandits were the Lop Nor people, it's hard to say. Luntai is located about 80km from Kucha. Using the camel's speed (on average 20-30km/day), I estimate that it would take at most 4 days to get to Kucha.

*a former salt lake in China, now largely dried-up, located between the Taklamakan and Kumtag deserts in the southeastern portion of Xinjiang, China; also known as the "mysterious moving lake".

Kucha, every time I think of that place, my heart would beat fast and that thin, lanky figure would appear before eyes. I wonder how old he is now. I ask the Persians what year it is. They can only supply me with some information:

1. The Central Plains is still in the Former Qin state of Fu Jian (though they are not clear the year of reign).
2. The Kuchan king is still Bai Chun (they only know he is around 40 years of age).
3. Only heard that Kumarajiva is a famous monk (the Persians follow Zoroastrianism, an old religion, so they do not know much about Kumarajiva, a Buddhist monk), and about 20-30 years of age.
4. They just passed Kucha and are on their way to Chang'an. But because I just saved their lives, they are willing to accompany me back to Kucha before resuming their journey.

It's not that I do not want to go to Chang'an. If my boss is here, he would have told me to depart for Chang'an immediately, and thus achieved another aim—

researching the famous Silk Road since the Northern and Southern Dynasties. But another voice keeps ringing inside me, urging me to go to that place, to meet him again. After reaching adulthood, how will Kumarajiva look like? If I can meet him again, my research will become more meaningful. Furthermore, I did promise Pusyseda that I would definitely return. I have to keep my promise, no?

We quickly gather water and begin our journey, afraid the bandits will return. Those that are lying unconscious will recover after 24 hours. It's very likely that they will exact revenge. Everyone is afraid and wants to leave this place as far behind as possible.

I adjust the time on my watch back two hours, to match Xinjiang's local time.

By the time we arrive at a camping location, the sky has become full of stars. It is a site of ruins, no longer habited by people. According to the Persians' pronunciation, this place is called Tahanqi. The site seems very old, the walls have survived years without maintenance, most of them have collapsed, and under the moonlit night, the ruins appear even more desolate. There are farmlands around so we must have gotten out of the Taklakaman Desert.

We set camp near the walls. The Persians generously set up one for me as well. The man who could speak Han tries to tell me that this place is connected to the Han dynasty. But because that person's Han is not fluent, it is only after many body gestures, do I somewhat get what he is saying. He tells me, this citadel was built by a Han person, a great general, whose strategic skills are like that of a god. A Han person? Great general?

Can it be the Tagan City that was built by Ban Chao? Tahanqi and Tagan sound similar. It might be the Persians pronounced it wrong.

My heart beats fast. The Tagan City was part of Kucha, and was where Ban Chao set his military base when he received the title of Protector General of the Western Regions. In the modern times, the exact location of this city is still unknown.

Then does it mean that mystery is finally solved?

[T/N: The next 6 paragraphs are omitted. They basically recount a brief history of Ban Chao's military conquest of the Xiongnu people and how he helped establish Han control over the Tarim Basin/Western Regions, from 73 CE to 122

CE. Ban Chao was indeed a famous Han (as in Eastern Han Dynasty) general. His family had a line of famous historians—father Ban Biao, elder brother Ban Gu, younger sister Ban Zhao—who wrote the historical text *Book of Han*, which recorded the history of the Western Han Dynasty.]

I stare at the broken walls underneath the moonlight, the ruins of a glorious past that are silently recounting the military prowess of the father and son generals [Ban Chao and his son] from over 250 years ago. The Western Regions' Frontier Command, now merely a desolate site of rubbles. By the 21st century, not even a trace of the ruins will even remain. In the night, listening to the Persians praying to their scriptures beside the fire, which I do not understand, their religious zeal adds a sacredness to the air, making the atmosphere even more desolate than it already is.

I am in the Sixteen Kingdoms period, a chaotic period for the Central Plains, where different states war with each other for control, so nobody pays attention to the Western Regions. That's why, since a long time ago, Kucha no longer had to obey the decrees of the Central Plains. Bai Chun [Kuchan king] allied with the Hu people in Central Asia and planned to dominate the Western Regions, causing unrest in the surrounding areas. Fu Jian's main goal was unification, and with the support from Shanshan King and Cheshi King, he ordered his general Lu Guang to conquer Kucha. Baichun was backed up by the Hu army, totalling about seven hundred thousand, but it was still not enough to defeat Lu Guang's one-hundred-thousand army. Bai Chun escaped. His younger brother, Bai Zhen, ascended the throne. Kucha would then become a territory on the map of the Former Qin. And Rajiva's fate will also take a drastic turn from then on...

I don't know why, but my heart constricts in pain at the thought...

Chapter 16: Reuniting with someone familiar

The next morning, we set off. God knows how much I want to stay and research this ancient city that cannot be found in the 21st century. However, after thinking twice, I decided to follow the Persians. There are two reasons: One, the merchants chose to return to Kucha because of me, how could I delay

their [original] journey any further. Secondly, I have to leave for my own safety because who knows if a second group of bandits might come along. Anyhow, let's just head to Kucha first then come back here later. After all, this place is not very far from Kucha. Having made my decision, I woke up early and conducted a quick survey around the place, then marked the location on the map so that it'll be easier to locate later on.

After we set off, reluctant to part with the ancient city, I keep looking back until it becomes a small dot in the sky and finally disappears from sight. On a positive note, along the way, I get to see many surprising landmarks. I discover the ruins of a military base from the Han Dynasty that still has remnants of war left behind. When noon break comes, I use the time to quickly measure and examine the site. I find many pottery fragments and even some Han copper coins. According to the map, this is probably the Wu Lei Gate during the Han Dynasty. Later on, during the Tang Dynasty, a beacon tower and garrison fort will be built next to this site. There will be a large battalion and army camps set up around as well. This construction will remain even in the 21st century.

I keep conducting research along the way just like that. Three days later, we arrive at Kucha.

Seeing the familiar walls, my heart beats fast. A strange feeling arises in me, as if I have 'returned home'. I wonder if Rajiva is still Kucha. How old is he now? Does he still remember me?

We enter the citadel from the eastern gate. My eyes widen when the guard asks for documents. While I ponder whether I should tell him that I 'know' the State Preceptor, the Persian who knew Tocharian has already slipped a small pouch into the gate guard, who then waves his hand and allows us in.

This is the ancient city of Kucha that I once knew? From the main streets to back lanes, every nook and crane has been swept and cleaned. Everyone is dressed in their best clothes and drifting towards the western gate, their faces full of eagerness. I look at the Persians. They shrug, not knowing what is going on either. I have to grab a passerby for answers. The person sees that I'm wearing Han clothes and explains that today is the procession of Buddha festival. Later there will be handcarts carrying Buddha statues into the city from the western

gate, processing on the streets for everyone to see.

Procession of Buddha festival? Faxian and Xuanzang wrote that this was the largest Buddhist festival held in India and in the Western Regions.

Seeing me in a daze, that passerby thinks I'm a Han person and thus do not know about this festival, so he begins to explain it to me eagerly. After the Buddha reached Nirvana, Buddhist disciples who wanted to see him again decided to start this festival on the Buddha's birthday, so everyone can 'see' him and pray. Prayers on this day are rumoured to more effective than usual. But this



kind of festival never gets to the Central Plains.

I am quite fortunate, to have arrived here at such a right time, how could I miss such an important Buddhist festival like this. I bid the Persians good bye. Since they carry so many goods with them, surely they cannot accompany me any further. The leader of the merchants wants to give me some money but I refuse vehemently. He then decides to give me a string of transparent agate beads and puts it in my hand. I reluctantly accept it.

After parting with the Persians, I merge with the crowd and move along to the western gate. A temporary dais is set up on top of the gate, covered by yellow and red canvasses and decorated with countless fresh flowers. The people sitting on the dais are dressed in fancy clothes. Even though I cannot see clearly, I guess that they must be the Kuchan royalty and nobles. People squeeze by me and eventually force me to take a dozen steps back. Finally I find a small spot enough for my two feet, but I must stand on my tiptoes to look.

A red carpet around hundred meters in length spreads from the gate. At this moment, the sea of people suddenly moves. My eyes follow the movement and look towards the gate. Still on my tiptoes, I see two identical carts with large wheels, around 4-5 meters tall, decorated grandly like a mini palace, covered by a yellow canvas. I have seen this Buddha procession at the large square before, where next to the Buddha were two smaller Bodhisattva statues. The Buddha

statue is made of gold, wears a golden kasaya robe with complex patterns and numerous precious jewellery.

The carts slowly enter the western gate and pull to a stop on the red carpet. Bai Chun [the Kuchan king] steps down from the dais and removes his crown and shoes. Feet bare, he walks on the red carpet, both hands holding a long incense stick over his head, and faces the Buddha statue in a reverent manner. The king is displaying signs of age, his body heavier than before. Suddenly, I'm pulled into a trance. The person standing in an upright posture behind Bai Chun, the one wearing golden kasaya robe and exuding otherworldly aura, it's Rajiva! It is indeed him!

Like a movie, everything around me blurs into shadows and all the noises vanish. In my eyes, only the image of Rajiva is clear.

He has grown up, seems to be over twenty years of age. [He looks] just like a Greek statue with that high nose, big bright eyes, long thick eyebrows, and those light gray eyes of his that seem to be able to see through everything in this world. His thin lips are pursed together, a vivid line that captures people's attention. He looks very tall, must be over 1m80 [5'11"]. His physique is firmer than when he was thirteen, and though still thin, it is proportionate. That narrow face, pointed chin, and elegant as a swan neck, every line of it is graceful. Not to mention his dignified aura and calm demeanor, which becomes even more prominent in the crowd, against the muddy background [metaphor], bringing shame to others around him.

Rajiva, Rajiva, how could you become this handsome, this bright? If I keep looking at you, once I return to the 21st century, how would I be able to look at any other man?

Bai Chun kneels down before the Buddha statue. A female servant brings forward a pot of bright flowers. The king puts the incense in the burner before the Buddha, then scatters the flowers on top of the statue. The crowd erupts in cheers. At this time, the queen and the noble ladies are also standing up and scattering flowers down from the gate. Drums begin to sound. The carts slowly move along on the carpet and enter the city. Baichun and a few other people lead the procession. Rajiva is also with them. Anxious, I yell out: "Rajiva, Rajiva,

I'm here. I have returned!"

The crowd swarms to the gate. I get pushed around so much that I feel as if my feet are no longer touching the ground. Rajiva suddenly turns back in my direction. I want to call him, but people from behind suddenly push forward and make me fall to the ground. I rush to stand up, but he has gone away. Looking at that tall figure slowly disappearing into the city, I smile sadly. He probably cannot hear me. Amidst all this noise, how could he? Only now do I feel a burning pain from scrapes in my palm and on my elbow. These summer clothes that I wear are really no good!

I follow the procession in a daze. Every time the carts pass by the entrance of a temple or palace, they will stop. After that a number of men and women dressed in beautiful silk will rotate the wooden trays in their hands and dance. The sashes on their clothes fly along the wind. In the cheerful music, with their practiced moves, they would scatter the flowers from their trays as they dance. The crowd around them clap their hands in applause. Next is a beautiful girl dressed in soft tulle dress, two hands holding a golden bowl, dancing on bare feet, her moves light and happy. From time to time, she would lift her left foot and her hands would bring the bowl over her head. This dance was captured vividly on the paintings in Dunhuang and Kizil.

I ask an old man standing beside me. He tells me that these two dances are called tray dance and bowl dance. Tray dance is a dance where one scatters flowers on Buddha statues and on the people, representing admiration and praise towards the Buddha. Bowl dance is a dance that originated from the story of the Buddha, who in his six years of penance, in order to restrain himself, had used every austere method possible in eating and living. But even when he fainted from fatigue, he still could not attain enlightenment. Finally, when he meditated under the Bodhi tree, he was able to reach enlightenment and founded Buddhism. Later, he went to wash up in the river after many years, and after that received from a young woman a bowl of porridge. This bowl dance is thus based on the story of that young woman who gave the Buddha porridge.

The dances and music are very impressive, especially for someone from the 21st century like me, but they are unable to extinguish the heavy feelings like a wall in my heart. Unknowingly, my eyes keep passing through the dances,

through the statues, through the noisy crowd, searching for that tall silhouette...

And every time I think I see that figure, I would rush up to look and then pull to a stop, realizing that it is merely an illusion. Only an illusion? I suddenly recall a poem:

*“Startled I look back
Catching that person’s silhouette
Next to embers full of sparks.”*

I take a deep breath and turn around once more. There is nobody. I rub my eyes and look around, still nobody.

The sky darkens. The streets are still filled with music and dancing. It’s time for me to look for lodgings. I escape the crowd and ask around several inns, who all tell me they are full. Should I go to the State Preceptor’s residence? But with me looking like this, I will only scare them. It’s not because I look like a villain. My looks are actually pretty okay, certain not to disappoint the audience [Ha!]. I once held the beauty queen title of the history research department. Of course, my class had more males than females. But that aside, if you suddenly see someone whose appearance after nearly or over ten years (I still haven’t confirmed how many years have passed since) has not changed a bit, how would you react?

I am still wondering what to do when luckily, my saviours arrive—they are the Persian merchants I met before. They bring me to their Zoroastrian temple, which has a few rooms at the back for travelling Persians to spend the night. This reminds me of merchant halls in Shaanxi, Wenzhou. That is how I spend my first night after returning to Kucha.

Ramblings: Yes, yes, I kind of lied. They didn’t quite “meet” yet. That happens in the next chapter, which will be coming very soon, I promise. Don’t throw rocks at me yet

On a more serious note, I recently found English version of the “Great Tang Records on the Western Regions” and the “Records of the Grand Historian” (Sima Qian) in a university library. So I’ll be editing some descriptive passages about places in these chapters as well as previous ones, if needed. Since poems

of Tsangyang Gyatso, the 6th Dalai Lama, are referenced a few times in the novel (the novel's title came from one of them after all), I've been trying to locate English translations of his poems in the same library. Gotten a few books on hold, hopefully they will contain the poems I need. I'm quite lucky to live in a place with access to high-quality public libraries.

I could translate from the Viet version of the poems, but I'd rather not for two reasons. One, I think using a translation that is direct Tibetan to English would preserve the essence of the poems better, rather than having me translate from a Viet translation of a Chinese translation (kind of like Rajiva's efforts of translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese). Two, the Viet translator tends to use Sino-Vietnamese (Viet pronunciation of Chinese words) to translate these poems, and though I can sort of understand it, it's hard for me to find equivalent English words. Think of it like reading Shakespeare's plays.

Some of you may think, why do I even bother going that extra mile in my translation? It's not like I even get paid for doing this. But that is actually the crux of it. If this translation project was an assignment (whether school or work), and it's something I don't like (or I don't like the teacher), then I would only do the bare minimum to satisfy the requirement to pass. But see, translating FBFY is purely voluntary on my part, and it started because of a desire to introduce this novel to more people. But most importantly, it started because of love, love for the novel, and respect, respect towards the author's efforts. She went great lengths to make this novel a true historical fiction, and that is the novel's major charm (aside from the romance of course). That is also why I was hesitant to attempt a translation. But I found the courage to start it, and I realized I could not do a half-hearted attempt. Because how could I? How could I possibly do justice to the novel and to the author, if I was not prepared to give 120% of my effort?

Though to be honest, I didn't foresee that I would go this far. If you have read my [Translation Approach](#) post, you'd know I was not aiming for high accuracy in translation. I was translating from a translation after all. At first it was just trying to use raw convert of the Chinese ebook to help aid the translation. Then it was some additional research to explain finer historical details, hence the paragraphs' footnotes. But that gave me a new dilemma, because going through

the novel once more this way, I was appreciative of it in a new light. I truly found the historical/Buddhist philosophical parts very captivating, especially as I research a bit more. Then on a whim, I wonder if the public libraries in my city, even university libraries, would have English translations of the Great Tang Records. Xiao Chun relied on this book heavily for many historical descriptions. Surprise, I found the English translation. So I tried searching for translation of other books, and also of the poems. It just kind of spiraled on and on without me knowing.

However, if you recall, I have mentioned before that this project is now a symbiotic exchange between the translator and the readers. I may love all the history and philosophy, but not all of you will. And to be honest, the novel often does get a bit too bogged down in the finer historical details. So I won't actually translate everything. You can already see me cutting things here and there for reading's sake. Plus, there is also the issue of time. This project is still just a side hobby and can't be prioritized over other things in my life. If I want to get through 100 chapters in a reasonable timeframe, I have to learn to be selective.

Sorry for the long thoughts. But then again, this blog is called a Translator's Ramblings after all

Ch. 17

Ramblings: Apologies for the whole disabled-comments fiasco in the last post. I promise to not let it happen again, but if it does, please let me know by commenting on another post. Anyhow, here is the long-awaited ch.17!

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 17: In any case, your return is a blessing

The next day, the Persians resume their journey to Chang'an. I'm not a Persian, nor am I a Zoroastrian; I cannot continue to stay at their temple for free like this. I thus decide to take a walk around and along the way, find an inn with a spare room.

The streets are still full of people jostling towards the western gate. I seem to hear them mention Kumarajiva. I stop a middle-aged man and ask. He tells me that today, at the main square, there will be a lecture by the famous Buddhist master Kumarajiva. It is a rare opportunity, so everyone is hurrying to get a good seat. I don't know if I actually understand anything he says next, only know that I subconsciously nod in reply, while my feet just float to go where he points to.

I return to the main square that hosts the "every five years assembly" [refer to ch.13]. The two Buddha statues that were in the procession yesterday must be kept in some temple around here.

Everyone is sitting on the ground, chattering away. On top of the dais is a golden lion throne, and on the seat is a brocade cushion made with golden threads. The threads glitter under the bright sunlight. I arrive late so my seat is all the way at the back. I notice that the crowd has more women than men. The women's cheeks are red from excitement and they are all craning their necks to

look at the dais. Ha, it seems a handsome man will always attract attention, even if he is a monk. If today's lecturer is not Rajiva but some old monk, would there still be this many women in the audience? I remember discussing with Rajiva once about a quote from Confucius: "Master said: I have not seen one who loves virtue as he loves beauty." [refer to ch.10] The old master was certainly right!

The crowd is stirring. The women crane their necks even more. My eyes are also looking anxiously at the dais. Someone is stepping up! It's not Rajiva, however, but Bai Chun the king and nobles, who then arrange themselves in a circle. After that, it's Rajiva! Still wearing the golden kasaya robe and a calm demeanor, he slowly steps toward the lion throne. Bai Chun kneels down before the throne and offer two hands out. Rajiva gently puts one foot on Bai Chun's hand, the other foot on the king's shoulder, and uses that to prop himself up onto the throne. The crowd is caught in surprise. Perhaps not only me, but even the Kuchan people have not seen such a display of reverence. In Rajiva's biography, there is a passage that says: "The Kuchan king ordered for a golden lion throne to be made, and a brocade cushion from Da Qin to be placed on top. That luxurious throne serves as Rajiva's seat during his lectures." The words were not false.

Once Rajiva is seated, Bai Chun and the nobles cross their legs and sit on the carpet. Rajiva begins to speak in Tocharian, perhaps because this is a public lecture and the prevalence of Sanskrit is not high. Rajiva's voice has lost the boyish touch of the thirteen-year-old. It is now a voice of maturity and gentleness. There is a certain musicality to it that seems to permeate every nerve of the audience. His introductory remarks are brief and succinct, making everyone feel at ease. His public-speaking skills have improved greatly. He must have participated in many lectures like this in the past years.

Rajiva begins his lecture. He tells the story of the when the Buddha was dwelling at Anathapindada Garden in Jeta Grove, near Shravasti [an ancient city in India]. The garden was a gift from Anathapindada [given name Sudatta, chief disciple of Buddha], having purchased it from Prince Jeta, as the residence for the Buddha and 1,250 bhikshus [fully ordained monks]. One day before noon, the Buddha put on his kasaya robes, picked up his bowl and entered the capital of Shravasti to seek alms food. When he was finished with his almsround, he

returned to the monastery to eat the midday meal. Then he put away his robe and bowl, washed his feet, arranged his cushion, and sat down cross-legged. At that time, the Venerable Subhuti [another disciple] stood up, bared his right shoulder and put his right knee on the ground. Pressing his palms together, he asked the Buddha to begin his teachings. *

* This story is the beginning to the Diamond Sutra, an influential scripture in Mahayana Buddhism and a key object of devotion to Zen Buddhism. It was first translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva.

T/N: This paragraph was translated based on 2 books I found: “The Diamond Sutra” by Red Pine, and “The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion” by Thich Nhat Hanh.



Frontispiece of the Chinese *Diamond Sutra*, the oldest known printed book in the world (dated 868 CE), found in the Dunhuang caves. The translation on this scroll is Kumarajiva’s.

The rest of his lecture is lost on me. The beginning was a story, so I could comprehend without difficulty using my Tocharian vocabulary, combined with knowledge on Buddhism and materials about Rajiva that I managed to learn after returning to the 21st century. But the next part of the lecture is complex Buddhist philosophy. Even though Rajiva lectures at a moderate pace and articulates every word clearly, there are too many Tocharian words I have not learned, so the whole thing becomes incomprehensible. This reminds me of that time when I attended Rajiva’s first lecture at Wensu—a vivid memory, as if it happened only yesterday. Actually, all my memories of Rajiva are very distinct and fresh, because the events happened less than a year ago.

Rajiva’s movement raises one of his sleeves, revealing a string of beads on his left hand. Are my eyes playing tricks on me? Why do I have a hunch that it is the

New Year's gift I gave to him before I left? I observe that figure on the lion throne carefully. Despite the far distance, I can still see the calmness on his face. Unwittingly, I let out a sigh.

Rajiva, the past couple days, I kept chasing after illusions of you, but could never get anywhere near you. Will I become just like these women in the audience with hearts in their eyes, only able to see you from a distance? You keep going with your lecture. I promise that this time, I will not leave, but will you be able to see me?

The lecture continues on for a couple of hours. Rajiva does not have any notes in his hands. In fact, throughout the entire lecture, he does not clear his throat even once [as in to pause for a breath]. When we were in Wensu, he lectured continuously for forty nine days. Even though I only listened to half a day, I am still certain that he would never need to rely on notes. I know he is highly intelligent and is gifted with a great memory, but still I cannot help feeling awed. On my part, I painfully admit that I could only understand about 20% of the lecture and comes to this conclusion: Rajiva just lectured on the meaning of “emptiness” in Mahayana Buddhism, and the sutra he spoke about is one of his most famous translations later on: The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, commonly known as the “Diamond Sutra”.

I cannot recite the Diamond Sutra entirely, but after returning to the 21st century, I spent a lot of time studying this sutra of great importance to Rajiva. The whole text of Rajiva's translation is not very long, not more than 5,000 words. It is a sutra recounting the dialogue between the Buddha and his senior disciple Subhuti. The concept of “emptiness” in Buddhism is difficult to express using plain words. That's why, in the Diamond Sutra, there are many esoteric ideas used to attempt to explain the inexpressible. This sutra has six versions in total. The Chinese translation was done by both Rajiva and Xuanzang. Rajiva's translation is called the old version, and Xuanzang's is called the new version. But Xuanzang's translation, a literal rendering word for word from the original, is not remembered by many. Meanwhile, Rajiva's translation, which favoured conveying the meaning over being precise, is circulated far and wide the past 1,650 years.

In Rajiva's translation of the Diamond Sutra, I love this gatha [short verse] the

most:

一切有为法，
如梦幻泡影，
如露亦如电，
应作如是观

*“All created things are like a dream,
an illusion, a bubble, a shadow,
a drop of dew, a flash of lightning.
Contemplate them thus like this.” **

* see Translator’s Note at the end

This beautiful and elegant gatha captures the sutra’s full title perfectly —“Cutting Through Illusions – Transcendent Wisdom”. The gatha is often called the “Six Similes” verse. Reading these kinds of lines, it is easy to understand why Rajiva’s translation is so highly regarded over the centuries.

That he is lecturing on the concept of “emptiness” so publicly means that he has converted from Hinayana to Mahayana Buddhism, actively promoting the latter despite opposition from other monks in Kucha. His hard work over the past ten years has culminated. The Kuchan people are now believing and following Mahayana Buddhism. But what Rajiva doesn’t know is that after he left Kucha and never return, Mahayana’s influence will soon decline. Hinayana will rise again, until the Kuchan were forced by the Uyghur to assimilate and follow the religion of Islam. Mahayana Buddhism only existed and flourished under Rajiva’s influence, like a flower that blooms early but withers when night comes!

The lecture has ended but I do not leave immediately. Instead, I walk northwest of the square. The frozen river from before is now flowing freely under the bridge. On the other side of the river, the “Strange” temple is still standing solemnly. The temple’s roof is glittering with gold; it must have gone under renovation. I smile, recalling that moment when I took hesitant steps on the ice, clasping Rajiva’s warm hand tightly in my grasp. That was the first time I experienced “snow blindness” —a painful temporary loss of vision caused by overexposure to the sun’s UV rays reflected on the snow. I close my eyes and recall that moment of fear.

"Rajiva, why can't I see you?"

"Don't be scared. Keep your eyes closed, they'll be fine in a moment."

"Rajiva, I won't become blind, right?"

"No, you won't."

"What do I do if I become blind?!"

"You won't."

"You have returned!"

Huh? The last sentence does not seem to be from my memory. I open my eyes and turn around. In a daze, my eyes kept opening wider and wider, until the only image filling up my vision is that figure of calmly demeanor...

"Ten years have passed, why is your expression still so silly?"

Ah that's right, he used to say, if not because of my silly expression, I would look much more intelligent. The memory is still so fresh in my mind, but for him, it has already been ten years. My nose stings.

"What's wrong? Do you not recognize me?"

His right hand reaches out, about to touch my shoulder, but then withdraws back. The eyes that were staring at me intently suddenly blink three times, cast down, brows furrowed. He suddenly grabs my right hand: "How?"

I follow his eyesight and look at my palm. The skin on my palm and elbow is scraped from the fall yesterday, but hidden in my clothes, they cannot be discerned from the outside. Only during yesterday's night, when I stayed at the Persians' temple, did I pull up my sleeves and gave my arm a cursory treatment. Right now, the scape is bruising purple and swollen. In this era, without anti-inflammatory drugs to treat these kinds of wounds, one can easily lose their life. If I cannot treat it properly, I must return to the 21st century.

I am lost in my thoughts until I felt being dragged away.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

Rajiva's hand is still as warm and moist as before.

"To find a physician."

He looks up at the dais. Everyone has left, only a few monks are remained cleaning up.

“The king has returned, come into the palace with me.”

“You...” I hesitate, “Do you not wonder why I haven’t changed?”

I feel weird if he doesn’t ask, but if he does ask, how would I explain it to him?

After ten years, Rajiva has grown up into a fine, handsome man. But I have not changed a bit. Then I realize he has ‘caught up’ to me—we are now both twenty-four. That man of the same age as me is pulling my hand, careful to not touch my wound. But Rajiva is a monk, and there are people there...

Feeling my steps stopping, he turns around and sees me staring at the hand that is holding mine. Rajiva immediately lets go, face flushing just as he did ten years ago. Eyes cast, he softly says: “Pusyseda said you are a fairy...”

He looks up at me, his light gray eyes as shining and pure as before.

“In any case, your return is a blessing.”

Hearing him speak, my nose suddenly stings inexplicably. I must be catching a cold!

We cease going into the palace to find a physician. I’m afraid to meet someone I knew. Rajiva doesn’t see me as a monster, but what if others tie me up and roast me in a fire? It’s better to be cautious. I do not tell Rajiva my worries, but seeing my hesitation, he understands right away.

I sling my Northface backpack on my shoulder and climb into Rajiva’s carriage. He offers to help me find a place to stay at night. His carriage looks simple on the outside, but is very comfortable inside. There are cushions to sit on and the horses are in good shape. As a monk, Rajiva should not have personal possessions, but in his whole life, he never has to worry about physical needs, always has attendants to serve him. When he was at Kabul, he was not yet ten but was already receiving special treatment: *“Every day there are two dried geese, three measures of rice and flour, six measures of butter. His residence has five young monks, ten little monks overseeing general affairs and cleaning. One can thus see the respect he garnered.”* * In the TV dramas I watched, the little monks often had to sweep with a big broom, but Rajiva probably does not

have to do any of these trivial tasks in his whole life...

* Not sure where this passage is from, or what exactly it was saying. Even comparing it with Chinese text does not help.

The carriage's sudden lurch cuts through my wandering thoughts. I turn around and look opposite of me. Rajiva's face has turned red again, since when I do not know.

I clear my throat. My eyes travel to the string of beads on his wrist. The original colouring is fading, and some beads even show signs of cracking.

"So old, why are you still wearing it?"

He withdraws his hand into his sleeve. "Still wearing it, do not want to change..."

I pull out from my backpack the string of agate beads the Persians gave me.

"Wear this instead."

Rajiva looks at the beads in my hand, appears very surprised. The beads are uniformly shaped, crystal red in colour, one look at it and you can tell it's a valuable item. A long moment later, he reaches out to accept the beads but does not wear them and instead holds it carefully in his hand.

He looks at me with a glazed expression. I think to myself, this carriage is too bumpy...

T/N: Okay, about the quoted gatha from the Diamond Sutra. The translation I used follows Rajiva's translation rather than the original in Sanskrit. This was done with the help of Buddhistdoor Global's website.

According to the translation and commentary by Red Pine (Bill Porter) in the book I found from the library, the original text of the gatha in Sanskrit contains 9 similes in total. He offered a more literal translation of the gatha as followed:

*"As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space
an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning
view all created things like this."*

In his commentary, Red Pine wrote: “In his gatha, Kumarajiva replaces *abhra* (clouds) with *ying* (shadows) but does not include *dipa* (lamps), *timira* (cataracts), or *akasa taraka* (stars in space), giving him six instead of nine similes. The last line of the gatha has been moved to the beginning in all Chinese editions...” (pg. 434).

There is another English version that manipulates the words a bit to make the gata rhymes (translated by Alex Johnson at diamond-sutra.com):

*“Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;
Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.”
“So is all conditioned existence to be seen.”*

I personally like this gatha too when I first read it. There’s something captivating about it. Taking literally, it may seem perhaps pessimistic—life is but a dream. But isn’t there some kernel of truth, of wisdom in that gatha too? I’m amazed at the way Xiao Chun managed to weave Buddhism into the novel and captured my attention so. Perhaps it’s the inner philosopher in me, the agnostic viewpoint I have on religions.

Of all of the books I consulted for this gatha, I like this commentary by Thich Nhat Hanh in “The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion” the best:

“Composed things [or created things] are all objects of mind that are conditioned to arise, exist for awhile, and then disappear, according to the principle of dependent co-arising. Everything in life seems to follow this pattern, and, although things look real, they are actually more like the things a magician conjures up. We can see and hear them clearly, but they are not really what they appear to be...

After reading this verse we may think that the Buddha is saying that all dharmas [in the sense of ‘phenomena’] are impermanent — like clouds, smoke, or a flash of lightning. The Buddha is saying ‘All dharmas are impermanent,’ but he is not saying that they are not here. He only wants us to see the things in themselves. We may think that we have already grasped reality, but, in fact, we are only grasping its fleeting images. If we look deeply into things, we will be able to free ourselves from the illusion.” (pg. 137-138)

Ch. 18

Ramblings: If anyone ever wonders where I am with the translation, you can check out my Progress page located on the top menu bar, which I will also provide link [here](#). The page has been there since the beginning but I don't think many are aware of it.

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 18: Going to the Cakuri Monastery

The carriage keeps on going. I open the curtain to look outside. It seems we are heading north. Looking at the fields all around us, we must have left the Kuchan capital a long while ago. How strange, to travel so far, could it be the inn is in the countryside?

“We are going to the Cakuri Monastery,” seeing my confusion, Rajiva tells me. “I am presiding over the monastery. It is located forty li from the capital, a long distance to travel.”

Cakuri Monastery? The monastery that Xuanzang once lectured at? Where the Subashi ruins that I explored extensively while at Kucha are? That's right, Rajiva did preside over the monastery. However, there are no documents that recorded the exact date. I didn't expect it to be when he is this young.

“We will arrive in time for the evening meal.”

My bewildered face must be an amusing sight because Rajiva's smile grows wider.

I am about to defend myself, but seeing that bewitching smile, I forget what I wanted to say and just stare at him. His smile at age thirteen was already quite disarming, but his smile at age twenty-four is even more enchanted. I put a hand

over my eyes. Have to stop this blinding sight that keeps making my heart throb.

“Your arm is still hurt, don’t touch it.”

Rajiva, do you know that gaze and smile of yours are what people in the 21st century called “giving signal” huh? I put my hand down, force myself to ignore those captivating eyes and try to change the topic.

“Is Pusyseda doing well?”

At the mention of his brother, his smile turns gentle. “He is currently the captain of the royal guard, highly regarded by the king.”

I knew it. Since young Pusyseda has always enjoyed martial arts more than letters, always making me play soldier with him every time we had a lesson. Only after that will he agree to sit down to study. Thinking about that little boy, I can’t help but smile. Now that he is a twenty-one, I wonder if he still remembers me, even though the time we spent together was barely three months.

“Is he married?”

“No. Pusyseda is always playing around, never seen him serious with any girl. When father urged him [about marriage], he said he will marry the most unique woman of all times.”

Haha, what a high standard! But then again, he is from the royal family, probably very tall and handsome to boot.

“I want to meet him but I’m afraid my appearance might scare him.”

Rajiva chuckles, seeming to remember something. “No, he always thought you are a fairy and that you will definitely return.”

“Can you arrange for us to meet then?” I wonder if I will be able to recognize Pusyseda as he is now.

Seeing Rajiva’s nod, I feel a sense of relief.

“Seeing you, then meeting with him later, I can leave in ease. “

Kucha was not a planned destination in this time jump. I purposefully diverted the plan to see Rajiva and find a way to meet Pusyseda; but after that, I will be exploring Taqian and head to Chang’an. I keep reminding myself, I came here to

work. I can only stay in this era at most a year. Even though the Lithium battery has made the time-travel watch much more stabilized, the battery's life is limited. To ensure that I have enough power remaining to return, I have to leave this era within a year. If not, I will have to stay here forever.

Rajiva looks a little surprised. "Back to the Central Plains? Or back to heaven?"

Heaven? I am stunned. "You actually believed that?"

"If not, why would a Han woman appear all alone in the desert? Why, despite having never been to Kabul, do you know the [Kizil] cave temple's design so well? Why do you know about the origin of the Masha temple in Khotan? Why is your knowledge more extensive and profound than any other woman's? Why did you disappear so suddenly without a trace behind? Why has your appearance not changed from ten years ago?"

His mountain of "why's" renders me speechless. Facing such a great debater like him, how could I win. If he continues to ask, I'm afraid I might just confess everything.

Seeing that I am at a loss, Rajiva gives a faint smile: "In fact, I already had doubts ten years ago. You suddenly disappeared, then returned ten years later looking unchanged. This led me to believe that your presence is the will of Buddha."

I break away from his gaze; it's making me nervous. I try to keep my calm and change the topic again.

"Is your father well?"

His eyes become clouded. "He has not been in good health, perhaps because he misses my mother."

I recall reading that Jiva would eventually leave Kucha for India, but there are no records as to when. I guess that by now, she has already left.

I become silent. Kumarayana, that elegant scholar, that intelligent and gentle person, must have always loved his wife dearly. He could have inherited a title in India (not sure which kingdom he was from because at that time, India was divided into many territories) but chose to leave it all behind to become a monk and travel to Kucha. One document wrote that Kumarayana married Jiva

because she loved him, even forced him to marry her. But I think, monks with a heart as hard as rock like him, if he didn't love her greatly, he would not have remained in Kucha and become the State Preceptor. After all, he had a title in India! If not because of his beautiful wife and his two intelligent sons, why would he agree to this self-exile? That's why he strongly opposed Jiva becoming a nun, and only reluctantly agreed when she went on a hunger strike for six days. Looking at his dear wife shaving her head, knowing that his family will never be whole again, it must have been painful. He himself is a monk, he should have been happy that someone else voluntarily dedicates their life to Buddha. But when that person is someone he loves, why couldn't he resign himself to it?

I open the curtains again to look outside. The carriage travels very fast, but since it is of good quality, the ride is not too bumpy. A patchwork of fields appears far away, and beyond that is the Tian Shan range laying against the blue sky backdrop. I turn around and find Rajiva's eyes on me again. Why is it that even though Kumarayana was reluctant in letting his wife join the monastery, he allowed his seven-year-old son to do so? Perhaps it was not just because the little boy needed his mother, but also because Kumarayana wanted Rajiva to look after her.

I am lost in my own thoughts. The carriage's wheels keep turning and my eyelids get heavier and heavier. The past few days have left me exhausted. My ear hears a warm voice speaking gently, "Ai Qing, lie down and sleep."

Without thinking any further, I lay my head down. Before I fall asleep, I remember lying on some soft pillow, but after that I sleep like the dead.

When Rajiva wakes me up, it is already afternoon. Rajiva's face is red again. My sleeping posture must have been weird. I feel embarrassed, but the feeling quickly dissipates after I climb down the carriage and see what is outside. The carriage has stopped before a magnificent site of architecture that is more like a city.*



This is the most famous monastery in the history of Kucha – Cakuri Monastery, built during the Wei-Jin² period, and also the largest Buddhist ruins that remained in the Western Regions [in modern era]. In the “Great Tang Records on the Western Regions”, Xuanzang translated the temple’s name to Chinese as 照怛厘 (Zhào Hù Lí). It reached its peak during the Sui and Tang dynasties, where Xuanzang stayed for more than two months and left behind numerous documents for later generations to study.*

¹ also known as the Subashi Ancient City. Ai Qing will explain it more later.

² 220-316 CE, encompassing the Three Kingdoms period, which tripartite division of China between the states of Wei (魏), Shu (蜀), and Wu (吳), and the Jin dynasty.

* The order of the sentences in these paragraphs has been slightly rearranged to makes it easier to follow.

The monastery’s area extends to the hills and mountains on the east and west side of Tongchang [Kucha] River. To the north of the site is a small Uyghur village rumoured to be the inspiration for the “Women’s Country” in the novel “Journey to the West” by Wu Cheng’en. Whether that is true is a mystery that has yet been solved.

Buddhist grottoes in the north are still left standing to this date, where there are frescoes and stones carved with Tocharian characters. However, most of the Buddhist statues in the monastery are believed to have been destroyed by Muslims later on [who overtook Kucha] because their religion prohibited idolatry.

The Cakuri Monastery used the Tongchang River as natural border separating the temple into two areas, west and east. The Kuchan people today call the entire site Subashi Ancient City, the most significant historic site in Kucha aside from the Kizil Caves. Today, if you want to travel to the Cakuri Monastery in

Kucha, you have to mention the Subashi Ancient City because those who are not experts on the history of Kucha will not know which temple is the Cakuri. In reality, Subashi is only a small city at the southern end of the west side of the temple, merely affiliated with the entire site that is the Cakuri Monastery. Subashi is the resting stop for tourists who come here to visit. The city is filled with numerous pagodas, both tall and short, making the eyes tired from just gazing at them.

We are currently inside the Subashi City. Rajiva brings me to a small courtyard at the edge of the city. The one who opens the door is an old man. There is something familiar about him. The old man is also studying me. Ah, I remember. He is the housekeeper from the State Preceptor's residence, named Masavu, who served Kumarayana from India to Kucha. It takes him longer to recognize me. When he does, he is so overcome with surprise that he keeps pointing at me, unable to say a word. Rajiva explains to him in Sanskrit. The man starts to calm down, but still looks at me curiously as he leads me inside.

The courtyard is not very big, consists of only two, three small buildings on each side. Like other houses in Kucha, the courtyard also has a grapevine, which is currently in full bloom. The grapes are maturing, filling the air with a light sweet smell. [Ai Qing is then brought to a room.] The room's furnishings are very simple: bed, cupboard, table, chairs, and no extraneous items. It is spotless everywhere, as if the entire place is free from earthly musk and dirt. The only belongings of value are the two bookshelves leaning against the wall. A glance at them tells me that they are filled with all kinds of books: Han, Tocharian, Sanskrit and a couple others that seem very familiar.

"This is my reading room," Rajiva explains, seeing my interest in the shelves. "Pusyseda has no interest in books, so father gave me all the books from home."

"You live here?"

"I live in the temple. This is merely a quiet place for me to read." The eyes on his thin face are not looking at me. "You can be at ease here, Masavu and his wife will look after you."

Rajiva steps out. I quickly set out my belongings. A moment later he returns with a bottle of medicine wine and a clean white cloth. I try to treat myself, but

when the wine hits the wound, I grit my teeth in pain. Watching from the sideline, Rajiva scolds me for my clumsiness, takes my hand and gently dabs the wine-soaked cloth to my wound. The wound on my palm is actually not that serious, but the big gash on my elbow is. I roll up my sleeves and show him the blistering wound.

Rajiva stills at the sight of my bare arm. Bandaging forgotten, a strange look crosses his eyes as they travel along my arm. I suddenly realize that the person before me is no longer the teenage boy of thirteen but someone of ten years later, a man the same age as me. During this period in history, it is not appropriate for a woman to show her bare arm in front of a man. I pull down my sleeves and tell him I will treat the wound myself.

He has not spoken this whole time, but suddenly grabs my arm to his side, rolls up the sleeves and dabs the wound with the cloth. His movement is not gentle [as before], but the serious look on his face makes me forget about the pain. I just carefully observe him.

Under the dim oil lamp, a faint circle of light reflects on his face, casting a glow on the slightly upturned eyebrows, the high nose, and the pursed lips. That handsomeness makes breathing difficult for the person opposite. The distance between us is close enough that I can smell the scent of sandalwood from his body, an intoxicating scent that seems to pull me closer. I suddenly come to a realization—I have to leave this place soon, before I make a big mistake. The kind of mistake that my boss will not forgive, that even I will not forgive myself for making.

Masavu and his wife walk in with food. The food's aroma helps dilute the heady scent in the room. Masavu still seems to be suspicious of me, evident in the eyes that keep glancing at me. I do not know what Rajiva told him to make him accept my return, so I can only offer a weak grin in reply. I ask Rajiva later and am told that his explanation was that I am Ai Qing's niece. I laugh hard at that. To explain it like that...But wait, I thought monks are not allowed to lie? I am about to tease Rajiva for it but stop in time. Even I do not know how to explain my return [and unchanging appearance].

“Rajiva, I left behind my backpack last time, did you keep it by any chance?”

I left behind so many modern items, including my notepad and sketchbook. My boss has repeatedly told me not to leave behind any garbage from my time, because if someone finds it in the future, then... Imagine, a grizzled archeologist hard at work digging up a relic, when he suddenly discovers that a corner of the item says the word “Northface” ... What a scary thought!

Rajiva nods but the expression on his face is off. How strange, could it be he took a liking to my backpack? Don't joke around, Northface is the most famous brand in the world for traveller's backpacks! The fund used to purchase it was provided by the researchers, or how else could a poor student like me afford it. No matter how much Rajiva likes it, I cannot give it to him.

“I will bring it to you in a few days.”

I nod and take another gulp of the mutton soup.

“Rajiva, I want to visit the Cakuri Monastery. May I?”

He has been watching me eat and at my request, gives a slight nod. “I will take you there tomorrow.”

At night, I sleep on the low wooden bed. There are no bed sheets and soft pillows in this era, but I am used to it. Rajiva said he does not live here, probably to let me feel at ease. I am pretty certain he used to live here, because a faint smell of sandalwood remains on the blanket, the pillow and the mat I am lying on. That clean, soft scent lulls me into a deep slumber.

For those who want to know more or see more photos of the Subashi Ancient City, here are some links I found/relied on in my research:

- 1) [Xinjiang's Tourism](#): general info from the official website of Xinjiang's Tourism
- 2) [Xinjiang Travel](#): mostly photos
- 3) [China Today](#): article about when the Subashi Ruins was designated UNESCO Heritage Site (June 2014) and some info/history.

Ramblings: China has always been one of my destinations to travel to when I'm able (as in not broke as I am now), but now I am adding Xinjiang (Kucha) to

the list of cities to visit in China. I would love to see the Subashi Ruins, the Kizil Caves, the Tian Shan range and the Xinjiang Museum. It'd be quite a detour but definitely worth it. I'll be able to see remnants of the Silk Road as well. Ah, I'm already excited at the thought.

Ch. 19

Ramblings: I meant to post this earlier but this chapter is just really long and filled with too many details that required research—places, historical/Buddhist figures, Buddhist sutra, Buddhist/Hindu terminology, *etc.*

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are also words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 19: Visiting the Cakuri Monastery

A creaking sound early in the morning wakes me up. I struggle to open my sleepy eyes and in the haze, I see a thin silhouette standing in the room full of sunlight.

“Rajiva, why so early...”

“I-I’m s-sorry...”

The backlight makes it hard to see his face but listening to his voice, I hear a hint of embarrassment. Rajiva hurries back out, and another creaking sound plunges the room into darkness once again.

I look at the watch. It’s only 7:30. Ah, I forgot, every day he is already up at 4, and from 5 to 6 is the morning mantra, then it is time for breakfast. For him, 7 o’clock is no longer early. But I still want to sleep... I try to catch some shut-eye for a few more minutes before getting up reluctantly.

Rajiva and I depart at around 9 o’clock. The small Subashi City is already packed with people travelling about, from local monks to traversing merchants. I do not want to give Rajiva any trouble so I try to walk at a distance from him. Rajiva walks ahead, I follow behind, and every once in a while he would stop and look back, then continues on his way.

Rajiva seems to be popular with the locals. Almost every person we see on our way would clasp their hands in greeting towards him. A couple holding a newborn even comes up to him to ask for a blessing. He pats the baby's head and mumbles a short chant. Grateful, the couple thanks him profusely. Rajiva turns to look at me with a smile and then continues on walking, stopping here and there to greet people on the streets.

We exit the Subashi City and arrive at the entrance of the western Cakuri Monastery. My first impression of this temple is the spectacular pavilions placed on the walls surrounding it. "Kucha has more than ten thousand monks, accounting for one tenth of the population." The Cakuri Monastery alone has five thousand monks. The prominence of Buddhism in Kucha is most evident by the magnificence of the Cakuri Monastery. However, at this moment, the temple has yet reached the peak seen during Xuanzang's time.

When she was carrying Rajiva, "Jiva's awareness became much more pronounced. Having heard about the famous Cakuri Monastery and that there are many great masters residing in it, she would go to the temple and light up incense sticks every day with the nuns, one mind and heart towards the Buddha." So when he was still in his mother's womb, Rajiva had already 'absorbed' most Buddhist philosophy. His great intelligence was perhaps born from this special circumstance? I stifle laughter at the thought.

We walk towards a low square wall outside the main gate. A statue of Gautama Buddha is placed inside. I chase away all improper thoughts and get into my professional mode, ready to pull out my sketchpad and begin my work.

"Ai Qing, no need to hurry. Let me show you around the temple first, and then you can return here to draw."

"Really?" I am overjoyed. "That's right, you are the abbot with special privileges after all! Then, I can come here every day to draw?"

"Naturally," Rajiva smiles.

Illuminated by the light of early summer, he cannot look any brighter. I force myself to look away.

"Rajiva, where is the jade stone that contains the Buddha's footprint located? Can you take me there?"

“You know about this jade stone?” Rajiva appears very surprised. He looks at me curiously. “[But] It’s a treasure special to Cakuri Monastery only.”

How do I know about it? The answer is simple: Xuanzang saw it with his own eyes and recorded it in the Great Tang Records. At the end of the 19th century, a Russian treasure hunter was able to uncover this jade stone. He had the foolish notion to break the stone into halves to transport it back to his country. Fortunately, the local people intervened in time and were able to protect the precious stone. After Liberation [Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949], the stone was shipped to the Beijing Museum of Natural History. The bigger half weighs more than 1,200kg and the smaller half weighs more than 700kg.

Now I no longer need to travel to Beijing to see the jade stone, and this time the stone will be whole. How can I not be excited about that? That is why, when Rajiva brings me to a small but ornate altar behind the main hall, and I get to see with my own eyes that enormous jade stone shaped like a clam and yellowish white in colour, I am filled with regret for not taking along a camera. The stone is more than 30cm in width, over half a meter in length and more than 10cm in height. The Buddha’s footprint is formed naturally in the centre of the stone. Depictions of this kind of footprint can be found in many places. [For example,] You can find the footprint of the great master Padmasambhava* anywhere in Tibet, the only difference being that the print is found on trees and natural stones, [left behind] so that Buddhist followers can feel the Buddha’s omnipresence.

* (lit. “Lotus-Born”), also known as Guru Rinpoche, was an 8th-century Indian Buddhist master.

I do not tell Rajiva these thoughts. Instead, I copy him by pressing my palms together in a gesture of respect and place an incense stick on the jade stone. After we step out of the altar, I see that there is a long corridor behind, but both sides are covered, giving off a dark and enigmatic aura that seems to stretch on forever.

Seeing my gaze, Rajiva takes a step toward me and softly says, “That is where full ordination occurs. You are a layperson and thus prohibited from entering.”

Ah, by full ordination he means upasampada! It is no different than receiving a degree from a Buddhist university! Only after undertaking upasampada are they

fully qualified to become a bhikkhu [monk]. Rajiva was famous since young and his knowledge and achievements in Buddhism are rivaled by none. However, he still needs to follow the monastic rules. That is why, even though he may have understood the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism a long time ago, he still needs to undertake upasampada like other novitiates when he is of age.

I once visited such an area [of full ordination] in Longxing Temple located near the town of Zhengding in Hebei Province, north of Shijiazhang [provincial capital of Hebei]. The temple was built during the Sui dynasty [586 CE]. However, the temple did not have long and dark corridors like the ones here. There are not many temples/monasteries that can perform upasampada. Those that can are usually large in scale. Cakuri Monastery is the only one qualified to perform the ordination in Kucha.



Longxing Temple

Stepping into that long and dark corridor, each novitiate's mind must be filled with a myriad of thoughts? Have they decided to spend the rest of their lives devoted to the way of the Buddha? To purge all thoughts about love and desires? To take on the responsibility of promoting Buddhism? With those thoughts in mind, the novitiates will slowly walk to the end of that corridor. Awaiting them will be three masters, seven witnesses, shining razors [to shave their hair], and solemn chanting. From that moment on, they will be free from the cycle of life and death, from greed and desires, forever parting with the earthly realm...

I turn around to look at Rajiva, who is silently gazing at that long corridor with a pensive expression. Perhaps he too is thinking about that important day [of ordination]. Will you be the same, Rajiva? Will you be ready to part with the



earthly realm?

We walk [next] to a dim hall. Seeing Rajiva, the other monks immediately press their palms together in a half bow. Rajiva nods in reply and speaks to them briefly in Sanskrit. This hall is not very big. At the centre is a statue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva* and all four sides are filled with paintings. I recognize this Bodhisattva because in his hand is a long staff. Ksitigarbha was famous for this vow:

“Until the Hells are empty, I vow not to become a Buddha,
Only after all living beings are saved, will I myself attain Bodhi.”

His vow means that he aimed to liberate those poor souls in Hells. That is why, after Buddhism entered the Central Plains, this Bodhisattva’s popularity continued to grow. He is considered one of the four central Bodhisattvas along with Samantabhadra, Manjusri and Avalokitesvara. Legend says that Mount Jinhua in Anhui province was the bodhimaṇḍa* of Ksitigarbha.

* a term used in Buddhism meaning the “position of awakening.” According to Haribhadra, it is “a place used as a seat, where the essence of enlightenment is present.”

I stand there comparing the differences between depictions of Ksitigarbha in the Western Regions and those in the Central Plains. A little monk walks in with an oil lamp, hands it to Rajiva and quietly leaves. Rajiva lifts up the lamp to illuminate the paintings on the walls. I am currently in front of an image of a disabled person with broken arms and legs, their face contorted in pain, and all kinds of torturing devices and punishments. How terrifying!

These paintings depict the pain and suffering beings undergo in the eight narakas [hells].

No wonder this Ksitigarbha's hall is so dimmed and dark. They probably wanted to send the [Buddhist] followers into a scare with these horrifying depictions of the hells. Most temples from mid-size and above have these kinds of paintings.

I know about the eight hells but cannot recall the exact names, so I implore Rajiva to explain.

[T/N: WARNING! The following descriptions of the hells are quite disturbing. I wanted to skip this part but it provides us a clear image, literally, of what beings may face as result of bad karmic deeds, and also of what the monastic may face for breaking their vows. This is what Rajiva and Ai Qing have to consider if they ever decide to pursue a romantic relationship. If you have a weak heart and/or triggers, you can skip this part. Those who feel strong enough, please highlight the white text to read.]

I nod slightly and with his lamp as guidance, we keep moving forward. Only the two of us are remained in this dim hall. Rajiva's warm voice rings out amidst the solemn mood and in that moment, a melancholic feeling arises in me.

I suddenly feel so cold ah. The punishments for Buddhists are so much heavier!

The hand holding the oil lamp suddenly stops moving and trembles slightly. With the light flickering against the wall, those images of people withering in pain become a blur.

“What’s wrong, Rajiva?”

I look up at him. There is only a foot between us. Under the dim light, I see a flicker of pain in his eyes for a brief second before it dissolves into a composed face once again. Rajiva continues with his explanation.

There is an acerbic note to his voice, perhaps because he disagrees with the harsh punishment the monastic receives. Buddhism is very strict with its followers. Amongst those eight major hells, two are reserved for monks and nuns.

With that last painting, we have finished one round around the hall.

“Each of the major eight hells is subdivided into sixteen smaller hells. The crimes also divided into three levels. Those who have committed the worst crimes are sent into the major hell, and the others are sent into the smaller hells.” *

* **T/N:** This paragraph is originally placed after the next paragraph, but I think it makes more sense for it to be here.

Rajiva places the lamp on the altar of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, kneels down and bows three times, then exits the hall with me.

Greeted by the bright sunlight outside, all the negative feelings inside me are quickly swept away. I feel like Dante* who has just finished his journey through hells. My conclusion is: the human realm is indeed the best!

* Dante (c. 1265 – 1321) was a major Italian poet of the late Middle Ages and author of the famous literary masterpiece titled *Divine Comedy* (which, taken at face value, describes Dante’s travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise).

It is almost noon. Rajiva leads me to the dining hall reserved for Buddhist followers who are visiting the Cakuri Monastery. He sits down with me to eat as well. The way he eats is very elegant, befitting a person of royal background. However, what make me uncomfortable are the secret glances people are giving us. They do not say anything, but I know what they are thinking. They make me feel uneasy.

A person like Rajiva, even if he is from the modern era, is not an ideal choice [of companion]. If he is with me, I will be able to hold my head high everywhere we go, but with him being too good, too smart, too handsome like this, he will overshadow me. I would not only have to always be cautious and on guard against every pretty girl, but also hurt my head trying to find ways to bring my intelligence to his level. What fun can be found in such a life? So my conclusion is: I.don’t.want.it!

“Don’t want what?”

I jerk my head up and catch his clear eyes like pools of water reading me. I am mortified but unable to hide my face, embarrassed but unable to explain myself.

“Teacher!”

How fortunate! Someone has come to my rescue! It is...a Han person, no, two Han monks!

The two monks engage in a conversation with Rajiva in Sanskrit. I stand by silently observing my countrymen.

Rajiva [then] introduces them to me. They are monks who came all the way from Chang'an to here to study. Their Dharma names [acquired during Buddhist initiation] are Seng Chun and Tan Chong. My eyes widen hearing those names.

Seng Chun and Tan Chong! It was these two monks! They travelled to Kucha to study and upon returning to the Central Plains, they told Emperor Fu Jian of Former Qin that Kumarajiva was a monk with great intellect, a follower of Mahayana Buddhism and whose reputation was known throughout the Western Regions. A reputed monk in the Central Plains named Shi Dao An, having heard about Kumarajiva for some time, also persuaded Fu Jian to bring Rajiva to Chang'an.

When Fu Jian decided to invade Kucha, the emperor said the following to his general, Lu Guang: “I heard the West has someone called Kumarajiva who is proficient in knowledge of the Dharma, of yin and yang, a great intellectual in the region. I find him admirable. Sages are national treasures. Send me Kumarajiva as soon as you conquer Kucha.”

This story was passed on by many Buddhists later on. They believed that Fu Jian's decision to conquer Kucha was because he wanted to win over Kumarajiva. This is similar to women believing that the Trojan War was waged because of beautiful Helen, or Wu Sangui's surrender of the Ming dynasty to the Qing [Manchu] dynasty was because of his Suzhou concubine – Chen Yuanyuan. To think that those large-scale wars, with tens of thousands of casualties, were waged in order to win over a person, what an exciting story that makes! I am a historian, so of course, I do not believe Fu Jian started a war to capture a monk. Did Fu Jian really understand what kind of advantages Kumarajiva would bring to him? The emperor wanted Kumarajiva just because he understood the nature of yin and yang? [That is like saying] Emperor Wen of Han only wanted a great intellect like Jia Yi in his court to read his fortune.

* Wu Sangui was a Chinese military general who was instrumental in the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty in 1644. Emperor Wen of Han (202–157 BCE) was the fifth emperor of the Han Dynasty. Jia Yi (c. 200 – 168 BCE) was a Chinese writer, scholar, and official during the Han dynasty, best known as one of the earliest known writers of fu rhapsody and for his essay “Disquisition Finding Fault with Qin”.

“Ai Qing!”

Ah, I let my mind wandering far too long again. I turn around and see the two monks bowing in ceremony towards me. I quickly return the bow. They are the first countrymen I have met in my two time-jumps.

Rajiva introduces me as the niece of the Han teacher he had in his youth, who came to Kucha to pay my respects to the Buddha. I only exchange a few words with the monks. Since my limited knowledge of the Sixteen Kingdoms came from textbooks, I am afraid that if I speak any more, I may accidentally reveal history.

After exchanging pleasantries with me, the monks turn back to Rajiva and continue conversing about Buddhism. Because they speak in Sanskrit, which I do not understand, I turn to look at the paintings on the wall instead.

“That line can be translated into Han as followed: ‘As many beings as there might be in those worlds, Tathāgata would know their myriad streams of thought. And how so?’” *

* Tathāgata is what Gautama Buddha used to refer to himself in the Pali Canon. This quote is found in Chapter 18 of the Diamond Sutra. The English translation used here is based on Red Pine’s translation in “The Diamond Sutra: Perfection of Wisdom” with slight modification.

Rajiva is speaking in Han! I turn around and catch a small smile at the corner of his mouth. He wants me to listen to this passage? Surprised, I strain my ears to listen.

“The Buddha said, all streams of thought are not thoughts, merely spontaneous desires manifested as illusions. And yet they are called ‘streams of thought’. Why? Because it is impossible to retain a past thought, which has already passed without a trace, or to grasp a present thought, since it is still swirling. Even more impossible to seize a future thought, because it has yet to happen.”

* This quote is also found in Chapter 18 of the Diamond Sutra. Translation of this passage was done by relying on the works of Red Pine and Alex Johnson. The actual quote is shorter but Xiao Chun (the author) expanded on it a bit here, probably to help readers understand.

Rajiva is now quite fluent in Han. Coupled with that warm gentle voice, each sound is a precious pearl [metaphor], carrying every word into my heart like a gentle breeze.

“Thus there is no Dharma teaching to be explained, nor is there one who can explain the Dharma teaching.” Rajiva is standing tall in the hall. The corners of his mouth curve into a confident smile. He lightly inclines his head toward the two monks whose heads only reach his shoulder. “Rajiva’s explanations, were you two able to grasp?”

Seng Chun and Tan Chong look as if they just received great wisdom, quietly repeating what Rajiva just said in a mumble, their faces full of open admiration. I look at Rajiva from the corner of my eyes. The confidence that he is exuding and the wisdom he just displayed are too blinding for me to look at directly. Despite his young age, Rajiva’s mannerism is already like that of a grand master.

In the afternoon, we continue with the tour by visiting the northernmost hillside. There are a number of caves formed along the hill, which are used as meditation rooms for the monks. I say meditation rooms, but they are actually just small openings enough to fit one person each. Rajiva points me to one opening that has a vague shape of a human on its wall. He tells me, many ascetic monks once sat in meditation here, and over time, their figures become engraved into the rocks.

Hinayana Buddhism places a lot of emphasis on discipline [meditation]. A monk’s daily routine mainly consists of meditating in a vacant room and emptying their minds. This kind of practice is derived from the yoga* practice in India. Before achieving enlightenment, Gautama Buddha adopted an extreme ascetic lifestyle for six long years. He would sit in meditation for days and months, eating very little, and became very thin. After his awakening, the Buddha resumed normal eating habits and stopped wearing cast-off rags. However, he still kept meditation as part of his daily routine. This became one of the central characteristics of Hinayana Buddhism. That is why there are always a

space for meditation in every Hinayana temple.

* not to be confused with the form of physical exercise we know today, which is all about postures. Yoga referred here is a practice in Hinduism to control the senses, the mind, to achieve *moksha*—liberation, or becoming one with God—through various methods, not restricted to just physical postures.

But the rows of meditation ‘rooms’ before me are all empty. When I ask Rajiva about this, he smiles in reply.

“Ever since Rajiva became the abbot, had asked all the monks to actively go out, lecture and blend in with the surrounding community. Meditations can be done when it is convenient.”

Ten years ago, when Rajiva just came into contact with Mahayana Buddhism, he received many criticisms from Hinayana followers. They denounced him for trying to study heresy. Within the next ten years, using his intelligence, his eloquent public-speaking skills and his connections with the royalty, Rajiva poured all his efforts into changing Kucha’s religious thought to Mahayana Buddhism. Records about Rajiva said: “At that time, the number of monks who converted to the Mahayana school was over ten thousand. How extraordinary that was. Since then, Kumarajiva became revered by all around him.”

“Your mind went somewhere again!”

I pull my wandering thoughts back and look up at Rajiva’s handsome face.

“Rajiva, you are no longer that confused youth who kept hesitating about converting his religious belief.”

“Indeed.” His eyes seem to have travelled to the past. A memory seemed to pass by, for the corners of his mouth are curving into a smile. “Ai Qing, if not for your encouraging words, Rajiva would not have been able to find the courage and ambition [to do this]. The past ten years, every time difficulties arise, Rajiva would recall your warm words. Mahayana emphasizes on liberating all beings and rectifies many shortcomings of Hinayana. It is the only way for Buddhism to spread far and wide, to ferry people across. Rajiva has worked tirelessly to achieve this ambition.”

Rajiva’s eyes are staring at the meditation ‘rooms’ with a faraway look. “With the Buddha’s blessing, Rajiva finally was able to persuade the royal family and

many grand masters [to convert]. Hinayana, which has been rooted in Kucha for hundreds of years, has finally seen some changes.”

Standing atop this hill, one can see entire view of the Cakuri Monastery. The water in Tongchang River is rolling in waves, shimmering like diamonds under the late afternoon. The sun has begun to set in the west, casting its remaining rays of light over that tall figure. A gust of wind blows by and messes up his kasaya robes. Against the sunset backdrop, that statue-like figure of his resembles that of an eagle ready to take off into the sky. Below us is a complex of majestic Buddhist structures—his empire, and Rajiva is the spiritual leader of the thousands residing in it.

I suddenly realize that, ten years ago, I was able to converse with him about Buddhist philosophy. But now, his thoughts, especially those pertaining to Buddhism, have reached a level far beyond me. I am just an ordinary person. The knowledge I have is gained through 1,650 years of history. If we were born in the same era, like other [lay] people around him, I would only be able to look at him from far away, and dare not even dream that I can reach him.

“Rajiva,” I take a deep breath and join him in looking down from the hill. “Kucha’s population is a few hundred thousands. But in the Central Plains, millions are suffering in the rages of war, and more than ever, they need a spiritual guidance to lead them through.”

“Ai Qing, travelling to the Central Plains to promote Buddhism has always been a dream of Rajiva.” He turns to look at me. The smile on his face is like a spring breeze. “You always wanted Rajiva to go to the Central Plains, how could Rajiva forget.”

Receiving that mesmerizing smile, my stupid heart begins to beat unevenly.

It is now time for the evening mantra. I insist on returning by myself without his help. Rajiva is now the “CEO” of the largest monastery in the Western Regions, he cannot act like the youth he was, skipping [mantras] whenever he wanted. He has to set a good example [for others]. Hearing this, Rajiva nods in reply. He tells me how to get back [to Masavu’s house] and promises that when the mantra is done, he will return. I want to tell him not to do so, lest unsavoury rumours begin. But the words at the tip of my tongue just roll back inside. I know

how he is. Rajiva never lets gossip get to him. Besides, if I am honest with myself, isn't there a part of me that looks forward to it [his return]?

That is why, when Rajiva appears at the door just past six, I find myself staring at the door this whole while. The moment the door slowly creaks open and a tall thin shadow appears under the glow of the lamp, my heart suddenly starts to beat erratically. I feel as if my heartbeat can be heard echoing all around the house.

Rajiva resumes treatment of my wound. The close distance between us, that soft smell of sandalwood, they make me feel so intoxicated...

Ramblings: Longxing Temple in Hebei province is quite a magnificent place, over 80,000m² and a National Heritage site. It is one of the most large-scale and well-preserved Buddhist temples in China. You can access [this link](#) to see more photos (scroll past the Vietnamese words).

Ch. 20

Ramblings: Please imagine as if I am kowtowing to each and every one of you in apology. I will explain my absence a bit more at the end of chapter. If you're reading this, then I sincerely to thank you for your patience with me thus far. Since this has been long overdue, I'm sure you're all anxious to read the chapter. Go right ahead.

T/N: It has been a long while since I've gone back to the novel, so my translation may appear more clunky and verbose than usual. I apologize. Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 20: The tutoring resumes

Now that my living arrangements are settled, I can finally begin my research at the Cakuri Monastery. Rajiva has already told all the monks in the temple, from the gate guard, the watchperson over the main halls to the scriptures' archivist, to allow me to roam around freely.

The daily flow of pilgrims visiting the temple would find themselves witnessing a peculiar sight: A Han woman in Kuchan clothing holding a strange book and using a strange tool to draw on it. Every now and then she would pull out a strange roll to measure this and that. To top it off, the reputed grand master throughout the Western Regions, Kumarajiva, has ordered all the monks in the temple to not obstruct that woman's "work".

While I measure and sketch, I would often get to see Rajiva. This is the first time I get to observe his daily work in the temple. When he is not talking and lecturing to disciples about the scriptures, he can be found greeting monks who pilgrimaged from the nearby countries and even from faraway places in the

Central Plains. Rajiva also goes out to meet with the masses and promote his Mahayana teachings from time to time.

His morning mantras begin when I am still asleep, but luckily, I get to see his afternoon mantras from 4 to 5 o'clock. When the bell rings, all the monks would congregate in the main hall. Rajiva would put on his robes, perform with the monks the ceremonial salutation and lighting of incense before the Buddha statues, place himself on the highest seat and begin the mantra chant. Several hundred monks would chant in unison in Sanskrit. The cadence of their voices would echo around the hall, intermingled with the sounds of the temple blocks being struck. Your souls would feel as if they are being cleansed amidst that pure and ethereal sound.

My precious Northface backpack has returned. Not much is missing, not even the Atlas silk scarf. As I recall the day Rajiva gave me the scarf as a birthday present, his face red from embarrassment, I giggle at the memory and on a whim, put on the scarf around my neck. There are only a few things gone, like a sketchpad I had not used and a couple of pencils and erasers, but all of my sketches remain intact. Nothing worth getting upset for. I guess that Pusyseda must have taken them [the missing items] out to play with. To be able to regain these treasures after a decade and preserved in such good conditions, what more could I ask for.

In the evening, Rajiva arrives to treat my wounds as usual. Seeing the scarf, he stills for a second, then a small smile appears at the corner of his mouth. Rajiva asks that I resume being his Han teacher. The first book he wants me to teach is Sima Qian's *Records*¹. I thus begin my series of lectures with the great mythological legends, "The Annals of Five Emperors"². I have always loved to teach. Since I major in history, I often went to museums and asked to be a tour guide free of charge. I've always felt rewarded when the visitors listened to my stories with rapt attention.

¹Tàishǐgōng shū (Records of the Grand Historian), or simply Shǐjì (Scribe's Records) – a monumental record on the history of China, spanning over 2000 years from the Yellow Emperor to Emperor Wu of Han. The chapters are organized into five categories: Annals, Tables, Treatises, Hereditary Houses, and Ranked Biographies.

²Referring to the 1st volume of the Annals. The Five Emperors are a group of mythological rulers or deities in ancient northern China who in later history have been

assigned dates in a period from circa 2852 BCE to 2070 BCE.

My current audience consists of only one person, but the education level of this audience is very high. The audience is listening in total concentration and often nods in gestures of praise at me. I feel as if I am transported back to the time when I was his tutor a few months prior [in my time], and while the student is the same person, a period of ten years has passed. Now, I can no longer lightly knock on his head in reprimand, nor can I pretend to scowl in seriousness while teaching. Actually, it is even worse now, because the teacher would often steal glances at the student's handsome face, a face sculpted like a Greek statue. That face is so bewitching that the teacher would often lose focus, her eyes lost in some faraway place and the sound of her voice would slowly fade. Then she would suddenly 'wake up', face as red as a tomato and pretend to drink water, pretend to clear her throat, find the fan, go to the washroom, and so forth.



Avalokitasvara

One day at the Cakuri Monastery, I get to observe Rajiva hosts a festival for Guanyin. Guanyin is translated from the bodhisattva's Sanskrit name [Avalokitasvara]. Technically it should have been translated as Guanzizai [to match the literal meaning] but after Buddhism reached the Central Plains, the Han mistransliterated it as Guanshiyin. During the Tang dynasty, in order to avoid naming taboo of the state with the usage of the same character(s) in Emperor Taizong's given name (which was Li **Shi** Min), the bodhisattva's name was shortened to Guanyin.



Guanyin (female), photo
I took while visiting Đà
Nẵng, Viet Nam in 2015

At first, I do not realize that the festival is for Guanyin, the same one that later spread to the Central Plains, because Guanyin's Sanskrit name is very hard to remember. But when I see the statue of the bodhisattva, I immediately understand. During this time, Guanyin was not depicted in the familiar form of the Goddess of Mercy, but in the form of a mighty man with a long thin moustache, like the depictions found in Mogao and Dunhuang caves and the paintings from the Northern and Southern dynasties. But perhaps because Guanyin possesses the power to grant children and is the personification of compassion and kindness, the image of a female goddess is more befitting?

The festival lasts seven days. Since it is a public prayer festival, the lay can also participate. The novitiates would write the names of deceased family members onto wooden plaques, pass them to their masters, who will then place them before the altar. Then together with everyone, Rajiva place the flowers and incense sticks on Guanyin's altar and kowtow three times. Each gesture of his is tempered and elegant. After that, Rajiva moves to sit on the highest seat and gently shakes the copper bell in his hand. The crisp sound echoes far and wide. A moment later, the entire hall turns silent.

* [T/N: Forgive me for the tenses in this paragraph. It was hard to translate.]

His gaze would then sweep around the entire hall. Shrouded in the smoke from

the incense, with his high forehead, shining eyes and compassionate face that can see through everyone's soul, Rajiva looks like a god who has descended to the earthly realm. When he begins to speak, his voice is confident and strong—a voice that resonates throughout the entire hall:

“Self-awareness and liberation are signs of wisdom. Helping someone become self-aware and liberated is a sign of compassion. Avalokitasvara who possesses great wisdom and compassion is always watching over the people. He gives out advice and assistance based on abilities, character and wishes, which differ from person to person. From there on, He helps beings subtract sorrows and multiply joys, helps them lead a quiet life free from worries and fears.”

The monks kowtow in reply and begin to chant mantras in unison. The lay people who stand beside me also bend down to kowtow, which I immediately follow. After that, Rajiva would read a verse from the scriptures, and the monks would repeat after him, creating a uniformed chant that resounds in your heart, flows outward into the air and upward into the blue sky.

That day, the monastery gives out blessings* to everyone who visits, which are personally handed out by Rajiva. The queue extends all the way to the main gate of the temple. I move forward inch by inch and keep craning my neck to see the front. Rajiva's mouth chants mantra, one hand gives out the carefully wrapped portion to each person, the other hand gently taps his long staff on each person's head and wishes upon them good fortune*. Everyone smiles brightly in return.

* In this case, refers to the food being given out, but it doesn't actually mean food. English doesn't contain a word that can truly encapsulate the meanings of “lộc”. In some ways, it can mean “good fortune/luck”, can also mean “wealth”, but in the context of Eastern religions, it refers to a blessing of sorts from the higher beings. If anyone knows a better word, please leave me a comment below.

I have to stand in line for two hours before it is my turn. My stomach growls all the while. Rajiva is surprised to see me. There is a hint of a smile in his eyes. He turns to the side, whispers something to his disciple, then places the portion into my hands. I smile back, clasp my hands in salute and bow my head to receive the well-wishes. The staff taps on my head. I can smell the scent of sandalwood permeating the air. When I lift my head and look at Rajiva, I find a serene face looking back at me, an ethereal being that does not belong to this earthly world.

For some reason, my heartrate begins to speed up.

Just as I am about to leave the line, the novitiate from earlier returns to Rajiva's side and gives him a cluster of grapes. Rajiva receives it with a smile and hands it over to me. Grape is the most widely cultivated fruit in Kucha so it is not hard to obtain. I glance around and seeing that no one is protesting my special gift, accept it with a bow and move away.

I dare not eat the grapes and instead wrap them in a piece of paper to put in my backpack.

When he returns later in the evening, Rajiva appears a bit tired but otherwise in great spirits. He has to stay behind to give blessings for four hours straight and hasn't eating anything the whole day. Worried, I take out the grapes from my backpack. I want to offer them to him but don't know how to convince him to take them [the sun has set and he thus cannot consume food].

Rajiva watches me carefully. When he sees me unwrapping the paper and revealing the grapes, he is momentarily surprised. But then, without me saying a word, he breaks off a grape and puts it in his mouth.

Smiling at me, he says: "Very sweet!"

His actions give me pause. After a moment, I break off a grape as well. It is indeed very sweet, sweeter than all the grapes I've ever had before...

We sit across from each other enjoying the grapes. I suddenly remember a common tongue twister: "When eating grapes, do not spit out the skins. When not eating grapes, do spit out the skins." * With a grin on my face, I try to teach Rajiva the sentences. His Han still carries the Kuchan accent, making it difficult for him to pronounce the string of words correctly. I hold my sides in laughter the entire time. Such a happy moment it is. If only time can forever remain in this very moment...

* You can see why it's a tongue-twister here:

吃葡萄不吐葡萄皮 / chī pútao bù tǔ pútao pí,

不吃葡萄倒吐葡萄皮 / bù chī pútao dào tǔ pútao pí

The festival tires out Rajiva every day, but he still faithfully shows up at my place during the evenings. I put the lessons on hold for now and try to find ways to get him relaxed. There are times when I want to give him a massage, but it is

merely a thought I dare not carry out.

On the last evening of the festival, the whole temple is set alight by the little oil lamps on everyone's hands. Rajiva stands in front of the statue of Buddha, bows down in ceremony and lights up his lamp. Then one by one in descending rank, each monk would receive the flame from the previous monk's lamp to light his own, and pretty soon, the entire hall is illuminated by bursts of light like stars in the sky. I also have my own lamp. It feels like the light can see right through my very soul. Amidst this sacred atmosphere, Rajiva looks like the patron god of light, a being of great intelligence who will guide each praying soul, who will drop the wooden plaques with names of the deceased into the bonfire. The chanting of mantras begins, rises up into the air and pours into my ears. The scene moves me deeply. I feel as if tears will fall any second.

Later, even after several days have passed since the festival ended, I am still reminiscing about that sacred and solemn scene. Once again I am awed by the spiritual connection that religion provides. Perhaps that is why religions have existed since the very beginning of humankind. And I believe that religions will continue to exist alongside humans until we cease to be. Everyone seeks spiritual meaning at various points in life, particularly during times of suffering and sorrows. Buddhism was able to spread its roots in the Central Plains during the Northern and Southern Dynasties [420 to 589 CE] because it was a time of great chaos.

When I tell Rajiva these thoughts, he smiles at me in agreement. I am unable to memorize Buddhist scriptures and thus can only discuss the religion with him through the lens of history and philosophy. There are times when he can't seem to comprehend the words I use, but after a moment, his quick mind would provide him with his own interpretation. Those times we get to spend together are so short. When the morning comes and he has to return to the temple, I can't help but feel upset. Einstein's theory of relativity has never been truer.

I continue with my research and sketching in the temple. Sometimes, when I'm hunkered down just outside the main hall measuring, Rajiva would step inside to speak to his disciples. When I'm inside the hall copying the murals on the wall, he would come in with a group of monks to discuss scriptures, motioning me to continue with my work and pay them no heed. When I'm standing on my tiptoes

trying to measure the height of a pagoda, the shadow of a tall, thin figure would come closer, take my measuring tape and raise it above my head. When I'm feeling thirsty, a little monk would immediately bring me water without asking, and I would then catch a glimpse of brown kasaya robes I know too well exiting the door...

I cannot continue like this! Nowadays, every time I see Rajiva, my heart would start beating erratically without reason. During the days where I can't see him, I am like a lost soul, unable to concentrate on anything I do. At night, when I lay my head on his pillow, cover myself with his blanket*, I am filled with an indescribable happy feeling. When I enter the temple [to continue the research], my hand is drawing but my eyes are following his footsteps one by one, until he catches sight of me and smiles back.

*her room used to be his for those who may have forgotten

I know very well what these signs mean. If I continue to look at that bewitching face, continue to hear his voice, I will fall into an abyss and unable to, wouldn't want to, escape. Ai Qing dear, you can have feelings for anyone, but not for him. He is not your cup of tea. Between you and him is a distance of 1650 years. And the most important thing is, he will forever remain a monk while you, sooner or later, will have to return to your own life in the 21st century...

After two long months dallying around, my research at the Cakuri Monastery reaches its end at last. And after much hesitation, I finally decide to tell him my decision at the conclusion of our next lesson.

That evening, I teach Rajiva volume 61 in Sima Qian's *Records* titled "Biography of Bo Yi": Bo Yi and his brother Shu Qi protested the violent slaughter known as the Battle of Muye¹ by refusing to eat the Five Grains² of Zhou. They retired to the Shouyang Mountain and lived on fiddlehead ferns, until they were reminded that these plants too now belonged to Zhou, at which point they starved themselves to death. Under the quill of the Grand Historian Sima Qian, these brothers were praised for staying steadfast to their moral convictions. The "Biography of Bo Yi" is a short chapter, but the story itself represents Sima Qian's own moralization of history.

¹ circa. 1046 BCE, leading to the end of the Shang dynasty and the beginning of the Zhou dynasty.

² a group of 5 farmed crops that were of symbolic/mythological importance in ancient China, though which crops are in that group vary; also a figure of speech to mean *all* grains or staple crops

“But is Bo Yi and Shu Qi’s foolish righteousness worth imitating? At that time, the territory has been conquered by the Zhou. They vowed to not eat the Five Grains of Zhou and went off to live on a mountain to eat wild plants, but those plants were still the produce of Zhou. The Shouyang Mountain they lived on was within Zhou’s territory, and when they died in the end, it was also the Zhou who buried them.”

I let out a long sigh before continuing, “Every one of us will experience difficult situations in life, and in those moments of hardships, we all have to make a decision: Continue to live or follow Bo Yi and Shu Qi’s example by choosing to starve rather than bend their principles. If it was me, I’d choose to live. Because only by staying alive can I fulfill my ambitions. What about the commentaries of the later generations? By then I would be long dead, why would it matter what they think of me?”

I stare at Rajiva for a long moment, thinking about that turning point in his fate eleven years from now. When that time comes, his heart would no doubt have to undergo much suffering and pain. “That’s why, Rajiva, when you encounter difficulties later on, you must think about your ambitions, your goals in life, and use that as motivation to live.” I will not be here in eleven years and so can only give him this vague advice.

“People write books and compose poetry during times of adversities to convey their thoughts and feelings. Xibo (King Wen of Zhou) during his imprisonment in Youli interpreted the hexagrams of *Zhou Yi* [the core of *I Ching*]; Confucius while stranded in the states of Chen and Cai put together the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; Qu Yuan in his exile composed *Li Sao*; blind Zuo Qiuming wrote *Guoyu* [*Discourses of the States*]; Sun Tzu who lost his leg drafted the *Art of War*; Lü Buwei who was banished to the remote Shu region compiled *Lü’s Spring and Autumn (Annals)*; Han Fei during his imprisonment in Qin lamented through his essays “Solitary Indignation” and “Five Vermin” [later part of the book *Han Feizi*]; and the 300 poems in the *Classic of Poetry* were largely written by masters during their trying times. All of those authors had frustrations and sorrows they

could not express at the time, so they wrote down their thoughts and passed them on to later generations to read,” Rajiva holds his gaze on me as he borrows the words of Sima Qian to respond.

* [T/N: there’s too much going on here so I’m choosing not to annotate who each person is or what they wrote]

The two of us continue to stare at each other as the air around us quietens. Something unnameable grows in between us. His face eventually colours with reddish spots. He looks away. The expression I saw on his face is a mixture of various emotions intertwined together: slight embarrassment, a note of melancholy and a hint of...regret.

Rajiva, you actually don’t need me to teach you. The excerpt you just quoted is Sima Qian’s “Autobiographical Afterword” —the last chapter of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. I believe that if I ask you to recite the entire *Records*, you would be able to. So why do you still want me to continue with the lectures? My heart suddenly picks up its pace, as if it wants to jump out of my ribcage. I can guess why. It’s because you want to be able to see me every day, so you acted as if you have never read the *Records*, isn’t that right? But...but...

I squeeze my eyes closed, trying with all my might to control my rapid heartbeat, and speak to him in what I hope is a calm tone: “I won’t be going to the temple tomorrow. I have finished my sketches already. Do you know any group of merchants that will be setting off to Chang’an soon? If you don’t know, I can find out on my own.”

He stays silent for a few minutes, then says: “Right now in the Central Plains is a time of chaos, of endless wars between the Han and the Hu. You are all by yourself, so why do you insist on travelling to that dangerous place? Kucha may be a small kingdom, but at the very least it is much safer, why don’t you-”

“Rajiva,” I gently interrupt him, “Your ambition in life is to help all beings achieve self-liberation. To fulfill that ambition, would you be willing to go to the Central Plains during this dangerous time?”

“Of course.”

“I am the same.” Gazing at the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the life’s work of Sima Qian, I continue, “I also have my own ambition. I once told you, my

dream is to write a historical record, to note down all the events, to restore the historical truth.”

The Sixteen Kingdoms is known as one of the most chaotic periods in the history of China. Shi Hu and his son of Later Zhao killed Han people for sport, and within twenty years they have already slaughtered hundreds of thousands. Ran Min [an ethnic Han] ended the Zhao and began the extermination of the Jie people [Shi Hu was an ethnic Jie], even those who bore the slightest resemblance to the Jie. Northern China in those twenty years was brutal everywhere. Even if you give me nuclear weapon, I still wouldn't have the guts to travel to such a period. Fortunately, that was a time before Rajiva was born.

In this period, Former Qin has taken Liangzhou and Liaodong and in essence has unified northern China. Fu Jian is the emperor I most admire during the Sixteen Kingdoms period. I really want to observe the Former Qin he currently rules over, for in ten years, with his defeat in the Waterloo* Battle of Feishui, his Former Qin will quickly unravel and the North will descend into various civil wars once again.

* A battle in Belgium in 1815 in which the British and Prussians defeated the French under Napoleon Bonaparte. The name has become a general term to mean a decisive, final defeat.

I look at Rajiva and hope my firm gaze will speak for itself. He stares at me, then turns his head around and casts his unsettled gaze on the oil lamp. He tells me in a voice as light as air: “I will arrange it for you.”

I continue on with the lesson and Rajiva continues to listen. As if I do not know what he is thinking, I keep on pretending and pretending...

Our lesson eventually ends. Like usual, Rajiva quietly leaves the room. Just as I am about to sigh in relief, the door swings open again.

“Do you remember the Kizil Caves?” he asks in his usual calm tone, “Ten years have passed since you told me a cave temple would be built there, and now there are more than a dozen caves.”

“I will be going there in seven days for a Buddhist festival,” he looks at me with shining eyes, “Would you like to come along?”

I...I...of course I want to go! He knows well the things that attract my attention.

If I go there, I will be able to identify the grottoes, ascertain the time it took to dig and build those caves, and also be able to copy the frescos that became lost due to decay and human activity. These are all valuable historical information to record. I cannot resist the temptation. If I put it [going to Chang'an] off for a few days, it should be no problem, right? I should still have enough time, right?

Seeing my nod, he smiles brightly, "Then we will set off in seven days."

Ramblings:

In my last post, I said this blog will be on semi-hiatus until May. It is now August...Quite unforgivable, if I say so myself.

Why was I absent for so long? It's a long story, one I'm not sure you even want to hear the details of. The short version is that I've had a series of personal problems cropping up the past couple of months, making me unable to write. I lost the will to do many hobbies and projects actually. It was mostly my own issues and feelings I guess. Many times I wanted to at least post an update so you guys are not left hanging, but I didn't know what to say, didn't know when I'd be able to finish ch.20. All I knew was that I wasn't going to quit this project, because if I do, it'd weigh too heavily as a failure on my part, another dent in my shortfalls in life, and I wasn't having it.

In the past couple of weeks I picked up on reading again and was inspired to write once more. So I spent my time writing a couple fanfics (not related to FBFY), got positive response, which lifted my spirits considerably. It's not to say that I only write to seek self-validation from others, but sometimes hearing encouraging words never hurt. Then there was a holiday, I didn't have to work, so I had Sat-Mon off. I picked up where I left off in my translation of ch.20, worked during the week, then spent the entire Friday night yesterday until 2am to finish the rest of the chapter. Went to sleep, woke up with a fresh mind to edit, and here I am.

What does it mean for FBFY from now on? I'm not entirely sure. Because here's another thing that made me hesitant to pick up translating: **FBFY is getting republished in Vietnam this month**, under a title closer to the original!

Incredibly exciting news since the first and last edition went out of print before I could get a copy of Volume I. **However, the downside is that this edition will be translated from Xiao Chun's revised version.** Xiao Chun rewrote the entire novel some time ago (I'm not 100% sure on the timeline) and even wrote a bonus side story. This is the version the Vietnamese publisher is using.

From what I've heard here and there, **there are some extensive changes made to the novel.** This is both exciting and scary. As a writer myself, I know a rewrite will probably be much better for the novel as a whole, but as a translator, this is bad news. It means everything I've done so far may have been for naught.

I'm definitely ordering the books, already gave my mom a heads-up so she knows, but then I'll have to wait for her to ship it to me, so the earliest I can my hands on it is September. Unless someone uploads an ebook version. So here is what I'm going to do: I will probably still translate ch.21 and post it up within the next couple of weeks, but I'll then have to go on hiatus again to wait for the newer version. Might as well since school is starting again and I need time to sort myself out. **Once I get my hands on the books (online or hard copy), I'll read them, see what the changes are, and post an update for you guys. At that point I'll decide on whether to continue translating from the old version or the newer version** (the thought of restarting this project makes me want to cry already T_T).

What do you guys think? I've said before that this translation project is a symbiotic relationship. Your opinions as readers count too. So tell me your thoughts below!

Ch. 21

Ramblings: Thank you to everyone who left such kind and supportive messages for me since my last announcement. I promised to not give up this project, so here I am once again. Thank you for your understanding and patience so far. ♥

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets [] in sentences are words I added for clearer meaning.

This chapter is from the old version of the novel. See the end notes for more details.

Chapter 21: The Kizil Caves

Seven days later, on a bright summer morning, we set off on Rajiva's horse carriage to the Kizil Caves. The Kizil Caves are located about 70 li from Kucha, but with such a good carriage, our travel time only lasts two days. However, having to share the cramped space with Rajiva for that whole time is slightly uncomfortable. No matter where I look, his image remains in my line of vision. Serene Rajiva, smiling Rajiva, elegant Rajiva, eye-scorching Rajiva. My eyes, like an 800-megapixel camera, work non-stop to capture these images. If only I can have a photograph of him as a keepsake for when I return to my time. Return? That's right, I will have to return sooner or later, so it's best that I stop harbouring these hopeless feelings. I must focus, must put away these fantasies, must resist this charming and handsome man, and complete my work.

With these thoughts in mind, when the carriage stops for rest, I ignore the proffered hand and instead jump down on my own. During our meals, I help myself, determined not to be my lazy self from before who relied on his hands. When I finish chewing on the dry naan bread, I wipe off the crumbs on my mouth and refuse the handkerchief he offers. Embarrassed, he pulls back his hand. When we return to the carriage, unable to avoid looking at him, I close my eyes

to recuperate, and even when drowsiness hits, I refuse to let my body sway to the side, lest I wake up and find that I have used his shoulder as a pillow.

We reach our destination at last. I am impressed with my own self-discipline. During the past two days, despite being stuck in that narrow space that could drive one crazy, I managed to stick to my resolution of not developing any emotional attachments to historical people. It was also what my boss told me every time I time-travelled: “Always remember that you are a modern person, that you will have to return to your own era. Always remind yourself that if you happen to develop romantic feelings, history may change because of you...”

But seeing the Queletage Mountain dyed a reddish hue under the sunset, the grottoes that seem to run on forever, the cave openings set in a straight line, the long wooden ladders connecting one hallway to another, and those heavy thoughts about feelings and attachments immediately evaporate from my mind.



That evening, I stay at an inn beside the Muzat River. Although I was told that this is the best room available, the sanitary standard is still relatively low. Thankfully I have brought along my sleeping bag. When the night falls on the river banks, the atmosphere is cool and without clouds, allowing the stars to illuminate the skyline. Breathing in that unpolluted air, one cannot help but feel serene. I intended to wander along the riverside, but a tall and thin figure with soft footsteps keeps walking behind me and stirring my heart astray. I have no other choice except to turn around and return to my own room, abandoning that lonely figure to the luminosity of the moon overhead.

When we arrive at the cave site the next day, as expected, there are many

people who recognize Rajiva. The Kizil Cave Temple has attracted a great number of monks from all around to come here to train, and all the meditation rooms are filled up. Everyone looks at Rajiva with surprise, a few with scorn? No, no, how can it be? Why would anyone give Rajiva scornful looks? I must have been imagining it.

The abbot welcomes Rajiva with enthusiasm and later leads him to a special meditation room that was recently cleaned. How come? Don't people usually surround him with discussions about Buddhist scriptures? Why are they leaving him in that lonely room? I look around and realize that the other monks also stay rooted to their own rooms. In fact, for the rest of the day, nobody even set a foot outside. I find this very strange, which is perhaps due to my lack of understanding regarding the rules and rituals of the Buddhist monastery. Oh well, I am mostly here for those murals on the walls, so there's no point pondering these things any further.

There are 236 of the Kizil Caves in total [in my time], which are all numbered accordingly, and only 80 of those caves still have frescoes remaining on the walls. Most of the caves are meditation rooms for the monks following the Hinayana tradition. I once visited this site when I was still in the 21st century. The living quarters of the monks contain no murals, only a simple earthen bed and simple facilities in each. During the ancient times, these caves must be dug and built by hands, making it an arduous and costly process. At the beginning, all the associated costs that went into building this site were funded by the King of Kucha. During this period I am currently in, there are only three caves with murals, eight meditation rooms and two more caves with unfinished frescoes. The artists are still in the middle of painting them.

This is great! One can easily choose any topic—be it paint mixing, grid patterns, composition, the Buddhist stories depicted in the paintings—to write a high-quality academic paper on. I once visited the ruins of the Guge Kingdom in Ngari (now part of Zanda County, Ngari Prefecture, Tibet), and by chance met volunteers from the United Nations at an 800-year-old temple. They were in the middle of restoring the paintings named in the World Heritage list free of charge. I craned my neck up to chat with a Swiss female restorer who was squatting on the scaffolds. She showed me her toolbox: brushes of all sizes, trowels, tweezers,

palette knives, and numerous other tools that look very difficult to use. I watched her work in awe. The amount of attention required to work on the minute details made it seem like some highly skilled embroidery. After restoration, the murals seem to come to life, as if they were reborn. I deeply respect and admire the work put in by those restorers and conservators.

Having this chance to see with my own eyes the murals in the process of creation and completion, I am overcome with excitement to the point where I forget about hunger and exhaustion. I want to observe how the artists, in this setting where the tools are limited and the lighting poor, are able to create those great murals that generations later still admire. As I chat with the artists and immerse myself in their work, learning their techniques, sketching their finished murals, I think to myself—I have never been busier and happier!



They use the ultramarine made from ground lapis lazuli for the background, and then yellow powder or gold foil for the Buddha's robes, which will give the image of Shakyamuni [Gautama] Buddha a glowing sheen from afar. After centuries of weathering and decay, although the cinnabar red will turn black and the other colours will become unidentifiable, that lapis lazuli blue will not fade and remain as brilliant as ever. Lapis lazuli is a stone native to Afghanistan, a distance of over 1500km from Kucha, and possesses a seductive blue tint and pyrite luster that is highly attractive. In areas where merchants transported these stones to Kucha, the prices rose up to double its weight in gold.

The interplay of colours between the ultramarine, cinnabar red, malachite green and golden foil brings life to these magnificent sceneries, each painting a treasure for generations to come. Later on, when Kucha was invaded by the

Uyghur, whose religion [Islam] prohibited idol worship, the artists were forced to remove the yellow pigment from the Buddha robes, leaving the cracked gray earth underneath exposed to present day. Only that ultramarine remains throughout the ages, a colour so vivid that the 21st century scholars who gaze upon it cannot help but let out a quiet breath of admiration.

After the rise of Buddhism in the 6th century BCE, for hundreds of years, there were no statues of the Buddha. The only symbols of the Buddha were footprints, altars, the Bodhi Tree and the stupas. When I visited the Ajanta Caves in India, a series of Buddhist caves built as early as the 2nd century BCE, I did not see any statues, only the Buddha's footprints and altars. A century after CE, with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, idol worship became more common and statues of the Buddha began to appear.

[T/N: I never formally addressed this before, but it was my personal choice to use the alternative designations BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) instead of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini, "in the year of the Lord"). The latter is obviously Christian-based and I find that jarring in a story steeped in Buddhism.]

After Alexander the Great conquered Gandhara (north-west of the Indian subcontinent, now north of Pakistan and the northeastern border of Afghanistan) [in 327 BCE], Buddhist statues began to absorb more and more of the Greek techniques, turning the Gandhara style into a major school of Buddhist art later on.

The murals in the Kizil Caves are deeply influenced by the Gandhara art style and by extension, the Greek art. The statues of the Buddha that were later destroyed are representative of the Gandhara style: Oval-shaped face, symmetrical features, high nose, wavy hair tied into a bun. Wearing a long robe that leaves one shoulder bare and a beard. The Buddha, the bodhisattvas and the nymphs shown on the murals are mostly half-naked, depicted in graceful and delicate postures, and the clothes, sashes and jewellery they wear are painted with vivid strokes.

Right now, I am copying a mural titled "The maiden seducing Siddhartha". The mural depicts the early life of the Gautama Buddha when he was still the prince Siddhartha. Having seen life's endless sufferings and sorrows, the prince decided to become a monk. His father, King Suddhodana, wanted the prince to inherit

the throne instead, and so he tried to surround Siddhartha with all kinds of luxuries and pleasures.



Possibly referring to
this mural

In the middle of sketching, I suddenly feel a presence behind me. I turn around and see Rajiva staring at my sketchpad, his face incredibly red. I look back at my drawing and understanding dawns. I am currently drawing a courtesan leaning her curvaceous body onto the prince, a hand on his thigh. It is only a small scene amongst thousand other images in the murals. If I didn't copy the image and enlarge the details, nobody would have noticed a thing. Except now that I have done it, the figure of the courtesan is clearly visible, her position undoubtedly suggestive, and the scene now spans an entire page of my sketchpad.

A small blush travels across my face. I quickly close my sketchpad and ask him what's the matter. He says that he came to tell me that it is lunchtime. The past few days, I have purposely chosen to arrive at the caves at a different time and always ate lunch with the artists. Now that he personally came to look for me, only to notice I've been drawing risqué images, how embarrassing. I quickly look around and see that everyone has left. I have no choice but to follow him.

The past few days, Rajiva and the abbot were often found walking back and forth, constantly looking at some sketches, eyes looking at the cliff ahead, fingers pointing all the while. I ask him out of curiosity and get told that Rajiva is planning to use the donations from the royal family for the Cakuri Temple the past few years to build a life-sized Buddha statue here. I take a peek at the

design sketch. The statue is going to be 15m tall and in the Buddha's backlit aura, there will be a circle of smaller statues. This kind of depiction of the Buddha in Nirvana is different from that of the Hinayana tradition. This is the later Gandhara art style, also known as Indo-Afghanistan style.

Gandhara art travelled to the East along the Silk Road and began to flourish in the eastern region of Afghanistan during the Kushan period (1st – 3rd century CE). The Buddhas of Bamiyan that were later destroyed by the Taliban [who were against idol worship] represented the classic blended style of Gandhara art. In his youth, Rajiva followed his mother to Kabul, part of the Kashmir region and the center of Gandhara, so he must have seen those great statutes. Perhaps that is why the Kizil Caves also came to have those humongous statues. A project that grand in scale, without the hands and brain of a master like Rajiva, would have never seen the light.

But what Rajiva does not know is that this combination of Indian rock-cut architecture and the gigantic Gandhara Buddha statues of the Kizil Caves will not only be a sensation in Kucha, but will also later become a major influence on sites like the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang, the Yungang Grottoes and the Longmen Grottoes. My respect for Rajiva only seems to grow.

At the same time, I notice something strange. While Rajiva is busy working on this and that, all the other monks remain in their meditation rooms all-day. They do not come out even during meal times. Instead, little monks would bring food to each room. How peculiar. Perhaps they are observing some sort of ritual? When I bring this up to Rajiva during our meal, he tells me that they are merely meditating, nothing to ponder about. He is clearly not telling me the whole truth but asking anymore would only be futile. In the afternoon, when I resume my work alongside the painters, I put forth my inquiry to them.

“They are in a summer retreat.”

Summer retreat? Sounds familiar. Ah, in his Biography, the monk Faxian wrote that in his journey to the West, he also had to frequently stop for a three-month summer retreat.

“Every year, when the summer comes, all the monks will confine themselves to their rooms and not step a foot outside.”

“That’s right, they are not allowed to go out. Even if an emergency happens, they will still need to ask the abbot for permission before stepping out.”

“Right, right, they sit like that for a whole month. The grand masters have to sit for three months straight.”

* After some research, I found that the correct term for this practice in Pali is *vassa*. It is a practice within the Hinayana tradition. More accurately, the retreat takes place during the monsoon or wet season and lasts for three lunar months, usually from July but not always. Most Mahayana Buddhists do not observe *vassa*. Zen Buddhists, however, has a similar practice called *ango* in Japanese.

The discussion no longer holds my interest. The back of my nose stings. During the monsoon season, all the Buddhist disciples would remain on temple grounds and meditate. This is the time where everything grows, so they avoid going outside to prevent unintentional killing. No wonder those monks look at Rajiva with contempt. He is supposed to stay in his temple and meditate, but instead he is out travelling with a girl. Although he comes here to begin the construction of the Buddha statue, but must it be during this season of retreat? He is disobeying the monastic rules...Is it because of me?

In the evening, I walk along the Muzat River in a daze. I am aware that from a distance not too far away, he is gazing at me in silence. I wave a hand at him. The gesture startles Rajiva. He begins to walk towards me. When he reaches my side, I pat pat the stone next to me. He hesitates for a second before sitting down on it.

“Rajiva, you shouldn’t have gone out during the summer retreat...”

Startled, he casts his gaze toward the moonlit river and speaks in a calm tone: “I came here to begin the statue construction, a gesture of respect towards the Buddha, what is wrong with that?”

“Couldn’t that wait at least another month?”

Rajiva suddenly turns his gaze on me. Under the starry night, those eyes are like waves surging forward, and in the next instant, they have disappeared into the depths.

My throat constricts in sorrow and pain. I do not have the courage to look into his eyes.

“Rajiva, I have drawn quite a considerable amount. You can leave tomorrow.”

Silence. He turns his head back to look at the river, his expression unreadable.

I bite my lips and gather all my wits together, “Rajiva, I do not belong here.”

“I know.”

He suddenly stands up and straightens his back. His chest inflates up and down. He is really tall. My neck hurts as I look up at him. Or maybe it is not he who is too tall, but my head that is getting heavy, as if weighed down by rocks, slowly falling...

“We will leave tomorrow.”

I try to look up again, only to see the brown kasaya robes moving quickly towards the inn, and in a flash, vanish around a corner.

That night, looking out from the windows, underneath the pale light of the moon, I see a lonely figure standing beside the river. A callous breeze passes by and messes up the thin robes, making that figure appear even more lonesome. I stare at that figure for a long while as if hypnotized, until my clothes become cold to the touch. I wipe the tears that have fallen on my face and dash out of my room. The night is quiet, save for the water trickling in waves. There is no one by the river any longer. I return to my bed but do not fall asleep. Instead, my eyes watch the night slowly giving way to dawn and then to morning.

On the way back, we both remain silent in the carriage. There are deep circles around his eyes. And me? According to the bronze mirror, not that much better. He is gazing outside, and I am doing the same. We are both adults. We know that what cannot be, will not be, so why bother holding on uselessly?

I will return to the 21st century, return to my own life, and who knows, maybe I will find someone to love. There is an upperclassman in my program who has expressed his feelings toward me once. Perhaps I should consider further development with him. Even if he is not as handsome, not as intelligent, not as gentle, not as...I know, I know that upperclassman cannot be compared to Rajiva, but at the very least he is a real person, whereas Rajiva to me is only historical data to be collected, only a few lines in a pile of tattered books...

We remain in silence for the rest of the journey back to the Subashi City.

Before he returns to the temple, Rajiva stares at me for a moment before letting out a long sigh.

“I will arrange a group of merchants for you. In the coming days, I will have to sit in retreat and will not be able to return here in the evenings any longer.”

A long moment later, he is still rooted to the spot, hovering at the door, unable to take a foot forward.

“The Su Mu Zhe festival will occur in another ten days. You once said that you wanted to observe this festival. So maybe...” he hesitates for a second, “maybe wait until after the festival...”

I look up and find myself lost in the deep abyss of his eyes, unable to escape. My usually clever mouth becomes stiff as a board, my tongue as dry as the sand, and I only have enough strength to utter out a single sound: “Alright.”

The corners of his mouth curve up unconsciously. It has been a long time since I last saw him smile. But just to be clear, I am not staying behind because of you, Rajiva. I honestly want to observe that festival steeped in the Eastern traditions. I am an earnest student, a hard-working researcher, not an ideal...lover.

Ramblings: So, as it turned out, my mom refused to send me the newer edition of the novel in her parcel recently, claiming that they were too heavy (over 2kg or something). I was really upset. She said she will bring them over when she visits me next year. T_T

I still can't locate an ebook version of the new edition, so for the time being, I will continue to translate from the old edition.

Ch. 22

Ramblings: Surprise! I am back with another chapter already? I know, I'm surprised myself too :)) Jokes aside, this chapter is an important milestone in the story and one that I've been wanting to translate for a while. I was also able to translate this chapter much faster since it required minimal research this time. However, it is much heavier in emotions, so prepare your heart, everyone!

T/N: Any notes at the end of relevant paragraphs that are indicated with an asterisk * are usually my own translation notes, unless I say otherwise in square brackets. Words in square brackets [] in sentences are words I added for clearer meaning.

Chapter 22: Going for a walk

Ever since that evening, Rajiva has not returned even once [due to summer retreat]. I thought I would be fine with it, but as soon as the clock hits five in the afternoon, I find myself sitting still in the room, my eyes staring at the gate until the lights have gone out and the Subashi city has plunged into darkness. Every day, I would walk around the city with my sketchpad in hand, on and on, and unknowingly my feet would always lead me to the Cakuri Monastery at one point or another. I would pace back and forth in front of the entrance for a long while until the little monk guarding the gate starts to ask after me, at which point I would 'wake up', bow my head and quickly run away. There is an inexplicable sadness weighing in my heart, as if there are million hands grabbing and squeezing my heart. I try to focus on sketching the city, but his face keeps appearing again and again on the pages, one portrait after another, only to be erased a moment later.

There are only two days until the Su Mu Zhe festival, but Rajiva still has not appeared. When the festival ends, I will have to leave Kucha. Before I go, will I be able to see him one last time? Even though I know not meeting again would be for the best, so that I can forget it all...

That night, I curl up in the bed, my eyes still watching the gate, my thoughts a mile away. The bookshelf that once fascinated me is right in front of me, but now it hardly piques my interest. It is ten o'clock, which in the 21st century is only the start of nightlife, but in this era, ten o'clock is deathly quiet. I let out a long sigh. Yet another night is passing by.

Suddenly I hear a knock, the sound very soft, but I could catch it still. Next comes the sound of someone talking to Masavu in the courtyard. They are talking in Sanskrit. It must be him!

My heart beating fast, I sit up, jump off the bed and out of the room. I find Rajiva talking to Masavu in the courtyard but in the darkness, I am unable to make out his expression. Worry gnaws at me. If it is not something important, he would not have come here this late at night. Something must have happened.

I catch a sad look on Masavu's face as he returns to his room. Rajiva slowly walks toward me. Each step of his seems to take an enormous amount of will.

"This late at night, Rajiva should not have come..." his voice trembles, "But, my mind too full of thoughts, I went out for a walk, and somehow my feet led me to this place. Rajiva stood outside the gate for a long while before deciding to knock."

He looks up at me. The weak light from the oil lamp inside the house shines on his face, a face lined deep with sorrow. Exactly what has happened to render the usually calm and collected Rajiva into this state?

He stands rooted in the spot, a helpless look crossing his face. Using my most gentle voice, I tell him: "Rajiva, let's go out for a walk."

He looks at me with surprise, then with gratitude, before tilting his chin down and speaks in a small voice: "You should put on a coat. It's cold outside."

Subashi City during this hour is the picture of silence. The street lights have gone out, but the glow from the moon overhead is enough to guide our feet forward. For a while, we walk in silence. This is the first time I have been outside with him this late at night. Rajiva must also feel a bit awkward.

Subashi is a small city that holds more importance in religion than in military, which is why it lacks the usual walls like those of the other citadels. It does not

take long for us to exit the city and reach the Tongchang River. Since it is summertime, the water is rushing over rocks in rapid currents, a clear sound amidst the quiet night.

We find a boulder next to the river. I sit on it and draw my knees up, watching him in silence. The moon casts its glow on him, forming a small halo of light on his head.

“My Hinayana Master from Kabul was here recently.”

“Master Bandhudatta?”

There are stories about Rajiva trying to win over his Hinayana teacher, Bandhudatta, with the Mahayana doctrine.

“How do you know the name of my teacher?”

That startled me. “I...” Of course it was because I read texts about you!

“Ah, that’s right, I once told you [of his name]. To think you’d still remember it a decade later.”

Rajiva told me this in his youth? How come I don’t remember?

Embarrassed, I quickly change the topic: “You discussed Mahayana teachings with him?”

He nods.

“The past few days, Rajiva has been engaging Master with extensive discussions about the Mahayana doctrine, emphasizing on its good points, which Master has come to recognize. Master even asked Rajiva to be his Mahayana teacher, acknowledging my achievements, but no matter what, he is still my Hinayana teacher.”

I nod in agreement. In the world of Buddhism, when a person sets up a new doctrine, a new school of thought, and wants it to be accepted, then he must first win over the teacher who first brought him into Buddhism in a debate. Rajiva is no exception to this practice. This means that he must have emerged victorious in his (rigorous) debate with his own master. Even though after the debate, Bandhudatta has said that he will consider Rajiva to be his teacher in ceremony, the master still does not intend to change his own doctrine; in other

words, Bandhudatta is not letting go of his title as Rajiva's "Hinayana teacher". Is this the reason for Rajiva's frustration and sorrow tonight?

"Rajiva, everyone has their own ideologies. You being able to gain the master's recognition of your philosophies is already a great accomplishment. Unless you also wanted the master to abandon the Hinayana school altogether?"

He looks at me in surprise. "Rajiva does not dare to be that arrogant!"

"Then why are you so sad?"

Rajiva turns silent, eyes fixed on the river, lost in his own thoughts for a long moment.

"My mother..." he bites his thin lips, as if he wants them to bleed, "Today, Master Bandhudatta tells me that three months ago, in Tian Zhu [India], my mother...has certified to the third fruit."

I do not understand. "What does it mean to certify to the third fruit? Is that a terrible thing?"

"Third fruit, also known as anāgāmi, is the third of the four aspirants that a [Hinayana] Buddhist practitioner wishes to reach."

Seeing my puzzled look, he elaborates, "Anāgāmi can be translated as 'non-returner'. It means that having reached this stage, one will not return to the human world, and instead is reborn into the heaven of the Pure Abodes, where they will continue meditation to cut off the remaining five fetters [chains], to be completely free from the cycle of life and death [saṃsāra] and never reborn again."

Rajiva chokes up and takes a deep breath to calm himself, but his voice continues to tremble: "My mother has attained fruition of the path, has freed herself from sufferings and pains and entered the formless realm..."

I finally understand. He has spoken for so long just to tell me that Jiva, his mother, has passed away in India.

Historical records wrote that Jiva left Kucha to India by herself. Nothing is written about her after that. Turns out she passed away in India. And this news Rajiva just learned from his master Bandhudatta.

I stare at Rajiva in shock. No wonder he is filled with grief. Jiva's influence in his life was greater than anyone else's. She was the one who introduced him to Buddhism, who brought him to Kabul to study and escape the empty luxurious life of royalty in Kucha, who encouraged him to follow Mahayana doctrine. His life before the age of twenty was the result of her hands. Perhaps to Kumarayana, Jiva was not a model wife, but to Rajiva, she was a great mother, the founder and guide of his path in life.

"Rajiva, if you are that sad, then you should-"

"No!" He suddenly raises his voice, breathing fast, "Rajiva is not sad. Mother has certified to the third fruit. Her wish to be freed has been realized. She has reached the formless realm, no longer plagued by sufferings and pains. How can I be sad? I should not be sad!"

Rajiva is clearly overcome with emotions, his breaths short and fast. Those words were lies, weren't they, Rajiva?

"Rajiva," I gently pat his arm, "In this kind of situation, it's normal to be sad, because you have love, because you love your mother. Then why must you suppress your feelings so?"

"Love?" Rajiva murmurs the word as if it weighs a thousand tons, making him unable to fully form the sound, and what comes out is a trembled breath. "The Buddha said, 'All things are empty of intrinsic existence and nature.' Rajiva is a Buddhist disciple, how can I love?"

"The Buddhist doctrine tells us that life is suffering [dukkha]: birth, aging, illness, death, frustration, separation, dissatisfaction [and so on]. The origin of this suffering is attachment, or love. To reach nirvana, one must 'extinguish' love, and thus be free from the cycle of life and death, from suffering and pain. But, think about it: Was the Buddha entirely void of love? He had a wife and son, did he not care about them at all? He told us love is suffering, because he himself experienced the sorrows that love brings? And if one can really extinguish their desires, then why was the Buddha only able to do so at the time of his death? Nirvana, blown out, extinguished, release, without desire, without love, without craving...all these different terminologies are merely synonyms for death. Only death can extinguish desires. Is it because the Buddha was aware of this 'truth',

and that is why he painted a formless realm, a heaven so to speak, to compensate for all the sufferings a practitioner has to go through when they decided to cease all desires in this life? But why, why must one-”

“Ai Qing!” He cuts me off harshly, mouth trembling, his head in his hands, clearly in pain. “Please, do not speak any further...”

Rajiva turns his head to the side, not letting me see his face. His shoulders tremble under the moonlight. I can hear his uneven breaths. I move to stand in front of him and gently pull him into my arms. His body stills, and although he is not pushing me away, his breathing seems to have stopped.

“Just let your tears out. You are human, not a god. Crying because of a loved one is nothing to be shameful of. If you feel like crying then just do so. You will feel better afterwards...”

I pat pat his back gently. Although he is tall, his body is gangly and thin in my arms, making my heart constrict in pain. I wish I can transform into Jiva to give him comfort.

After much internal conflict (I think), Rajiva slowly wraps his arms around me in return. His movements are careful and light, as if I am made of paper and will crumble in his hold.

“Ai Qing!” I can feel the sharp fall and rise of his chest, can feel his arms tightening his hold.

“Ai Qing!” He continues to call out my name in a soft tone. Hot tears begin to fall down and soak through my shoulders, only to be cooled down by the passing breeze, before the cycle repeats itself again. Rajiva has finally let go and cried like an ordinary person.

He cries for a long time, as if this is the first time he has done so. A lifetime worth of tears finally flowing out. I cry along with him. We stay in each other’s arms just like that, crying with our whole bodies, until even the earth and sky get turned into rivers of tears...

I do not know how long it takes before we can calm ourselves. I have not cried this much before. Exhausted, I lean onto him so as to not fall down. Rajiva has also stopped crying, but he still has not let me go. The warmth of his body is

setting my heart aflame. Not wanting to step out of his embrace, I dare not utter a single word, lest I ruin the atmosphere.

At long last, Rajiva lets go of me. The moon has vanished, so I cannot make out his eyes, only hear his voice speaking slowly: “My mother knew that my wish is to travel to the Central Plains to promote Mahayana Buddhism, so before she left Kucha, she told me that whether Mahayana teachings can spread to the East will be dependent upon my efforts. But this responsibility brings no personal benefit for me. So what is my intention?”

I am still caught in the emotions from earlier, so I can only watch him in silence.

He pauses for a moment before continuing: “My reply was that Mahayana Buddhism aims toward the benefit of all and not just my own. If Rajiva can spread the Buddhist doctrines, help everyone become aware and liberate themselves, then even if that requires stepping into pan of hot oil, Rajiva will still not waver!”

When Jiva was still around, Rajiva was a child prodigy well-protected and cared for. Despite his intelligence, he was more or less a greenhouse flower that had not weathered the stormy winds of life. After Jiva’s departure [to India], Rajiva had to depend on his own strength and will to continue with his path. Can that ambition formed in his youth withstand the hardships? Rajiva does not know that Jiva’s worries will become reality in the near future. The price Rajiva will have to pay for promoting Buddhism in the Central Plains is the criticisms of later generations. If I can, I wish I do know what his future looks like.

“Rajiva, even though your mother is no longer by your side, she will continue to live in your heart. Whenever you encounter troubles [in the future], you will remember your promise to her and overcome those obstacles, right?”

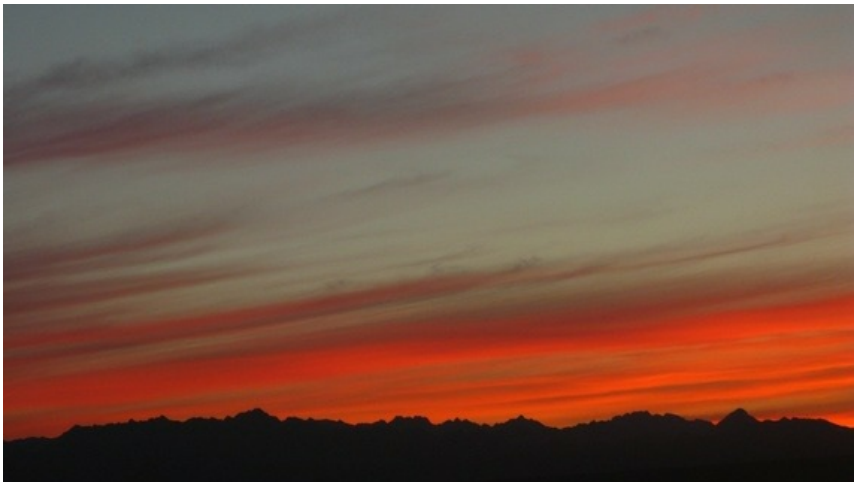
Rajiva nods. I try to find a change of topic to temporarily avert his mind from grief.

“Rajiva, tell me some childhood stories of yours, ones I have not heard before.”

Saying I wanted a change of topic was merely an excuse, because I honestly am curious about his childhood [beyond the historical records].

We just sit next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, as he recounts the stories: of his strict mother and her quiet affection, funny stories about his masters and fellow disciples, stories of his travels amongst the kingdoms in the Western Regions. Each story is of great interest to me. I find out that a person possessing an IQ of 200 like Rajiva was once a child who got teased by his fellow disciples, who got scolded by his mother for not having memorized his lessons. I realize he too has a [relatively] normal childhood; previously, I thought he has always been this intelligent and mature person since young.

To make him feel better, I reciprocate by telling him stories about me, about my family, my parents, classmates, my boss, about the books I once read, the places I have been to. Obviously I had to water down the stories into a language he can understand and to avoid revealing too much about the future.



Far away, atop the Tian Shan range, carmine rays are making their ways across the sky. The starry night has disappeared without us knowing. I look at my watch. It is nearly four in the morning. We have sat through a whole night.

I turn to Rajiva, “Let’s return. It’s almost time for your morning mantra.”

Rajiva looks as if he has just woken up from a dream. “Did we really sit through a whole night? Ai Qing, are you tired?”

I shake my head. I am not tired, but my body feels frozen. My thin coat is not enough to shield me from the chilly air of early morning.

Rajiva grabs my hands. His are not any much warmer. I smile, watching him rubbing my hands together to create some warmth. Rajiva suddenly looks up and seeing my smile, he stops his ministrations and instead places my hands onto his cheeks. My smile drops, as if the tsunami waves have finally conquered the last defense to my heart, breaking down the walls at last...

We stand there in silence, watching each other. His body heat is lingering on my hands. My palms are grazing the beginning of stubble on his face. That moment, it is as if an electric current suddenly passes through me, making my whole body tremble. I finally realize it.

I love Rajiva.

That's right, I have loved for him for some time now, ever since I met him again. It's nothing strange. A man of his caliber, so incredibly intelligent and refined in appearance, is not hard to fall in love with. I will no longer hesitate, no longer be denial. Love is love, how can I possibly deny this basic human emotion? I am just an ordinary person, unable to extinguish desires, so there is no point in struggling and making myself suffer so.

Before, I fought with myself and denied these feelings, because I viewed love with the rational perspective of a modern person. I want a love where my feelings are returned. I used my research as an excuse, constantly reminding myself I have to return eventually, worried that if I love Rajiva, it will be a love with no future. But, what if I do not return? What if I want to stay beside him? What if I do not care about the future? Nobody said that if I love him, I cannot continue with my work. I only know that right now, I love him and I will continue to love him in my own way. I also do not have to let him know my feelings. I can also choose to return to the 21st century with the memory of having loved him once.

I just love him. To hell with what happens after. Why must I be completely rational and think things through with logic?

"A day from now is the Su Mu Zhe festival. You should start to journey towards Kucha soon," a gentle voice passes by my ears, "Go back and rest. I have asked Kaodura to bring you to Kucha and arranged an inn for you. Though perhaps you should stay in the State Preceptor's residence [his father's]? After all, you wanted to see Pusyseda again!"

Kaodura? I am stunned. That is Rajiva's own coachman!

"I will stay in the inn. I am afraid I will give people in the State Preceptor's residence a scare [with my unchanging appearance]. As for Pusyseda, I will try to meet him before I leave Kucha."

After the festival ends, I will find a way to see Pusyseda. Ten years ago, he was little kid that was very fond of me, but now that he is an adult, he has his own life, and I do not want to disturb that. I just want to take a look at him from afar. That will be enough.

What I most want, actually, is...

“You...you...” I hesitate and hesitate, “You...will you be coming?”

Rajiva looks surprised. He lets go of my hands.

“Master is still here, and besides-”

“I know, the precepts say you are to abstain from dancing and music.” I suppress my disappointment and try to say with what I hope is a calm tone, “I’m just asking. You...do not have to come...”

He does not say anything in return. His kasaya robes are dyed the colour of maroon due the twilight sky, the folds fluttering thanks to the gentle breeze. He stands there, looking like a beautiful Greek statue against the deep rouge of dawn.

Ramblings: The passing of Rajiva’s mother is such a sorrowful event. Rajiva’s crying broke my heart when I first read it and now again when I was translating. The life in the monastery is an arduous one. I hope no Buddhist readers were offended by Ai Qing’s words on the cessation of ‘love/attachment’ in Buddhism. She is not religious but tries her best to be open-minded, and the way she views religions is from a practical perspective of a modern person who majors in history. Her interpretation of certain Buddhist ideologies is shaped by such factors.

I had warned you all before in my Introduction post to this novel, that the story deals with sensitive topics, which in this case is whether love can exist along with piety to Buddhism. The title of the novel itself sets up this central conflict. We have only reached the surface of this conflict—familial love. Romantic love, on the other hand, is another beast altogether.

At least Ai Qing’s admittance of her feelings for Rajiva (at least in her head) somewhat makes up for all the sadness. I bet there are many of you jumping in joy at that part, am I right? Not only has she admitted her feelings, she has

come to accept them in her own way too, and this is one of the many reasons why I love her character. How often do you see a character being able to come to terms with their feelings the way she did? It is very refreshing. Way to go, Ai Qing!

That said, she is leaving for Kucha in the next chapter, so we will have to bid goodbye to Rajiva for a couple of chapters. In return, we will get to see his bratty younger brother, Pusyseda, once again. If you thought he was bad as a kid, well, wait until you meet his adult self! He is truly incorrigible, that one. His antics will make you laugh, blush (yes I did use that word), and a number of other feels~

My mid-terms are coming up the next two weeks so that will slow down my translation considerably, but I will try my best to keep up. [It may have been evil of me to tease you all about Pusyseda and then make my way underground like this, ahaha, I'm sorry :P]